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DEFENDING THE FRONTIER: A STUDY OF THE US ARMY IN THE  
DEFENSE OF THE NEBRASKA FRONTIER IN THE YEARS 1849-1853  
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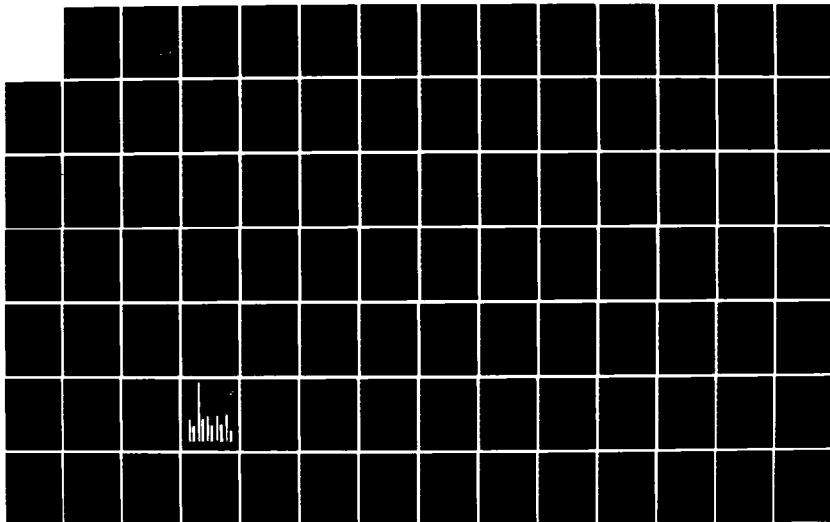
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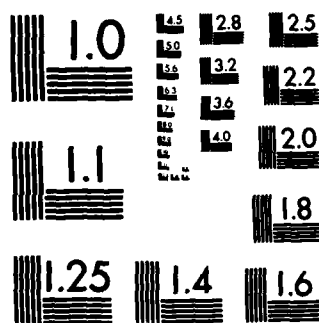
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DEFENDING THE FRONTIER

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A thesis submitted to Kearney State College, Kearney, Nebraska,  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Education in History.

DEFENDING THE FRONTIER

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Kearney State College  
Kearney, Nebraska

by

Christopher G. Clark

Captain, United States Army

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Arts in Education

December, 1984

### APPROVAL OF THE THESIS

This thesis was reviewed by each committee member. Final approval has been given for the acceptance of the thesis by the department and the Graduate School.

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## ABSTRACT

→ This thesis places particular emphasis →

The United States Army in Nebraska during the post-Mexican War period, 1849-1853, is the subject of this thesis. Particular emphasis is placed on the defense of the Great Platte River Road in Nebraska during <sup>1849-1853.</sup> ~~these years.~~ Those areas examined include: a look at the land - Nebraska; a study of the Indians inhabiting Nebraska during the years, ~~1849 to 1853,~~ and a brief look at the emigrants <sup>who</sup> ~~that~~ crossed the Nebraska frontier. The general condition of the <sup>U.S.</sup> ~~United States~~ Army in the aftermath of the Mexican War is also examined, along with a study of the Army in Nebraska during *this time,* the years, 1849-1853. *The author concludes:*

The conclusion of this thesis brings forth several points. First, the danger of Indian hostility against White emigration in Nebraska was greatly exaggerated, ~~during this time.~~ There was no danger to the emigrant of Indian attack during *this period.* ~~years, 1849-1853.~~ <sup>U.S.</sup> ~~United States~~ Army went into the Nebraska frontier to counter a perceived Indian threat that never materialized. This forced the Army to change its mission from one of area defense to one of humanitarian relief along the Great Platte River Road in Nebraska. Third, although the danger of Indian-induced hostility did not exist in 1849-1853, hostility, ~~unfortunately,~~ was inevitable between the Whites and Plains Indians of Nebraska. Hostility was inevitable, because of the destruction the White emigrants caused to the Indians' ecological basis of existence. Conflict, ~~therefore,~~ between the Whites and the Indians was to be only a matter of time.

A

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## INTRODUCTION

### DEFENDING THE FRONTIER

A great amount of literature exists concerning the activities of the U.S. Army in the "conquering" of the American West. For the most part this literature and its fictional and media depictions concentrate on the time immediately after the Civil War. There exists a gap in historical writings about the U.S. Army during the period of history right after the Mexican War of 1846-1848, up to the end of the Civil War in 1865. Little if anything has been written of this time about the U.S. Army and its actions in the defense of the western frontier. Most American history written on the period between the Mexican War and the beginning of the Civil War concentrates on westward expansion and the 1849 California Gold Rush.

The purpose of this work is to examine the actions of the U.S. Army in the years after the Mexican War in the defense of the western frontier. To be more specific, this is a study of the military defense of the area now known as the State of Nebraska during the years 1849-1853. The main overland trail for westward migration during these years started on the Eastern edge and went through the middle of the state. The Great Platte River Road, as this trail is called by historian Merrill J. Mattes, followed the Platte River Valley as the trail went through the middle of Nebraska from east to west. Used as a trail from 1841 to 1866, the most active years on the Great Platte River Road were 1849 through 1853. Almost half, or 47%, of the total traffic passed through Nebraska on this trail in those years. Some

military force had to be present in this place and time to protect United States interests during the westward migration.

Within this topic area lie two areas of concern relevant to the U.S. Army in the defense of the Nebraska frontier in the years 1849 to 1853. First, the U.S. Army went into Nebraska to counter a perceived hostile Indian threat. Second, the U.S. Army gradually realizing that the Indian threat to the emigrants was a minor one, found that its initial mission had slowly changed. The area defense of the Nebraska frontier was just one of the things the U.S. Army was responsible for. The de facto mission of the military along the Great Platte River Road became one of humanitarian relief. Rendering aid to hungry emigrants, tending the sick and wounded, repairing broken wagons, shoeing draft animals, providing postal and other governmental services were the prime activities at Fort Kearny, Nebraska.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. Army was still responsible for the defense of the Nebraska frontier, but the majority of its efforts was spent in rendering aid and assistance to emigrants traveling along the Great Platte River Road. As long as the perceived Indian threat did not materialize, the U.S. Army spent most of its time in Nebraska helping emigrants in trouble. Although there was no initial danger of Indian induced hostilities between the Whites and the Plains Indians of Nebraska, hostilities were inevitable between these two peoples. The basis of the Indians existence in Nebraska was a dependency on the ecology of the land. Thousands of emigrants pouring into and out of a land that could only support a few thousand Indians had a dramatic impact on the ecology of the land. These emigrants would use up limited timber resources, would use and foul limited water supplies and emigrant animals would graze on the lands used not only by the domestic Indian animals but also by the buffalo. In short, the emigrants would, without

knowing it, destroy the most fertile areas of the state, the areas along the largest watershed, the Platte River. Additionally the diseases the Whites carried with them, such as measles, mumps, cholera and others, decimated the Indian populations. By the end of 1853 conflict between the Indians and the Whites was only a matter of time.

As part of the study of the military in Nebraska during the years 1849-1853, this thesis will examine some other related areas. The first area inspected will be the area of operations, Nebraska, in the early nineteenth century. Climate, animal life, soil types and early explorations will also be addressed. Of particular note will be a traffic analysis along the major trail, the Great Platte River Road, in Nebraska. The native inhabitants of Nebraska, the Pawnee and Sioux Indians, will also be scrutinized in this study. The Pawnees were depicted as a peaceful people in a desperate contest for survival with the Sioux. Aggressive and warlike, the Sioux were slowly destroying the Pawnee in the Sioux drive to occupy the hunting grounds of Nebraska. Initially both the Sioux and the Pawnee were on good terms with the Whites, but this was destined to change. The change from good to bad relationships between the Indians and the Whites was a result of two factors: a lack of understanding between the two cultures and competition for a limited natural resource. Also examined will be the emigrants crossing the Nebraska frontier during the years 1849-1853. This investigation will show the composition and organization of the emigrants as they crossed the Nebraska frontier. Also examined will be the hazards of the overland crossing and the contributing factors to a 6% mortality rate for those who traveled the Great Platte River Road between 1849 and 1853.

Examined in greater detail will be the status of the United States

Army during the 1849-1853 time frame. This was an Army of 10,000 officers and men thinly spread across a continent that touched two oceans, this was a force constrained by Congressional economy and a lack of manpower. For those joining the U.S. Army at this time would experience low pay, poor food, terrible living conditions and a lack of advancement.

All of this information—the land, the Indians, the emigrants, and a status report on the U.S. Army—will lead into a look at the U.S. Army in Nebraska in 1849-1853. There is an examination of Fort Kearny and the actions which took place at and near the Fort. Here is a story not of violence, but one of benevolence.

## Endnotes, Introduction

<sup>1</sup>The spelling used for Fort Kearny in this thesis will be Kearny, not Kearney as it is otherwise known. This was the proper name for the post as set out in U.S. Army General Order Number 66, December 30, 1848. See Fort Kearny, Post Returns, March, 1849. Modern Military Records Division, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE NEBRASKA FRONTIER

The land now known as the State of Nebraska was a grassy, gently rolling plain at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Populated by the Pawnee and Sioux Indians, Nebraska was known by those east of the Missouri River as part of "the Great Desert," Lieutenant Stephen Long, who lead an expedition through Nebraska to the Rocky Mountains in 1820, called this area: "almost wholly unfit for cultivation and, of course, uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture for their subsistence."<sup>1</sup> Condemned by Long and others as unfit for habitation, Nebraska remained almost untouched by white civilization during the early nineteenth century. Nebraska as we know it now is not a desert, nor is it unfit for habitation. Even within the classification of grassy prairie, or plains flatlands, there is a large diversity to this land. The elevation varies from 825 feet in the southeastern corner of the state to 5,330 feet on the western border with Wyoming. A gentle rise in elevation, about eight to ten feet per mile, exists as one goes from east to west within Nebraska. Formed by glacial action, wind and water erosion, the land is gently rolling hills with some areas of flat land.<sup>2</sup> Most of the vegetation is grass—prairie and buffalo. Only three percent is wooded and these few trees exist only along streams and rivers.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, wood was highly prized by Indians and later the white emigrant because there were very few sources of lumber in this land.

The entire area of modern day Nebraska is part of the drainage system of

the Missouri River which forms the state's eastern boundary. The Platte River, a tributary of the Missouri River, flows across the state from west to east. The Platte River Valley is a natural corridor to the Rocky Mountains and it became a major trail in America's westward migration. Flowing through the northern part of the state are the Loup and Elkhorn Rivers, tributaries of the Platte. Still further north is the Niobrara River, which flows into the Missouri River. In the southern portion of Nebraska are the Republican and Blue Rivers, both of which are tributaries of the Kansas River. James C. Olson, in his History of Nebraska, divides the state into five general topographic areas: alluvial lowlands, loess, sandhills, high plains, and bad lands.<sup>4</sup> Since the majority of the actions discussed in this work occur within the confines of the Platte River Valley, we will concern ourselves with only the alluvial lowlands. Alluvial lowlands in Nebraska are those areas of terrain adjacent to and directly formed by the waterways flowing through them. Principally these are the areas lying along the Missouri and Platte Rivers.<sup>5</sup> This land was easily traversed, usually fertile, and occasionally wooded.

The climate of this land is anything but stable. It is fickle and prone to be occasionally violent and unpredictable in general. Extremes of heat and cold, thunderstorms, hail, blizzards, and tornadoes are all found in the Great Plains. Nebraska's climate exhibits a light rainfall, low humidity, hot summers, severe winters, and fluctuations in both the long and short term.<sup>6</sup>

Animal life in the state included antelope, deer, beaver, coyotes, foxes, rabbits, and squirrels. The two most notable and numerous members of the animal population were the buffalo and the prairie dog. Both the buffalo and the prairie dog were frequently mentioned by the early travelers



through Nebraska. The buffalo especially would play a key part in Indian-emigrant relationships.

The white man first came to Nebraska with the explorations of the Spanish and the French in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Gold was the driving force behind Spanish exploration, and since there was no gold in the Great Plains, the Spanish soon lost interest. For the French the love of empire and the fur trade were the stimuli for their moves. There wasn't a profitable fur hunting area to be found in Nebraska, so the French concentrated on the areas to the north and northwest. The first Americans to see Nebraska soil were the explorers, Lewis and Clark. They did not penetrate the interior of the state but went north along the Missouri River. In 1813 a group of fur traders traversed the state from west to east enroute to St. Louis, Missouri. These traders were part of the American Fur Company based in Astoria, Oregon, and were under the leadership of Robert Stuart. Following the natural corridor of the Platte River Valley, Stuart's party found the South Pass through the Rocky Mountains. This group also made note of Court House Rock and the Grand Island of the Platte. Seven years later these fur traders were followed by Lieutenant Stephen H. Long. Going up the Platte and South Platte Rivers, Long gave the name "Great Desert" to the land he crossed.<sup>7</sup> Captain Benjamin Bonneville led a wagon train composed of fur trappers west along the Platte River Valley in 1832. This was the first recorded wagon train to cross the Rocky Mountains via the South Pass.<sup>8</sup> In 1842 the Fremont expedition, under the command of Lieutenant John C. Fremont, set out to,

explore and report upon the country between the frontier of Missouri and the South Pass in the Rocky Mountains, and on the line of the Kansas and Great Platte rivers...<sup>9</sup>

The Fremont expedition is important for two things. First, Fremont's narrative and map was the first reasonably accurate guidebook for emigrants journeying along the Platte River Valley.<sup>10</sup> Second, and perhaps more important, Fremont's report of his travels refute and destroy Long's myth of the "Great Desert." In 1843 Senator Lewis F. Linn, after reading Fremont's report, announced on the floor of the Senate that this, "proves conclusively that the country for several hundred miles from the frontier of Missouri is exceedingly beautiful and fertile." Now the valley of the Platte with "alternate woodland and prairie" and ample water would provide "great facilities" for those crossing overland west to the Rocky Mountains.<sup>11</sup>

In 1845 three years after the Fremont expedition, the first military patrol went up the Platte River Valley under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Stephen W. Kearny of the First Dragoons. A military post, Fort Kearny, was established along the Platte River, at the head of the Grand Island in 1848.<sup>12</sup> Major Osborne Cross of the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen passed along the Platte River Valley in 1850 with the following comments:

The entire route...passes over an undulating prairie, which is of a dark vegetable mould, and in many parts might be productive if cultivated, particularly on the large streams. In rainy weather the whole route becomes extremely muddy and very difficult to travel over, but in this respect it does not differ from any of the prairies of the West. When the season is dry the ground becomes very firm, and as there are no hills to impede travelling, nothing can prevent trains of any size from moving over it with much ease and great rapidity. The few obstructions met with are found in crossing some of the streams, which could be removed with very little labor; and it is in the power of the government to make it one of the best public highways in the western country.<sup>13</sup>

This "best public highway in the western country" mentioned by Major Cross has become known to modern historians as the Great Platte River Road. This term, Great Platte River Road, describes all of the Continental Trails

that traverse the Platte River Valley. Past historians have referred to this collection of trails as the Oregon Trail, California Trail, the Independence Road, the St. Joe Road, the Omaha Road, and the Mormon Trail. Developed by historian Merrill J. Mattes, the term Great Platte River Road describes all of these overland trails as they extend up the Platte River Valley.<sup>14</sup> Looking at the map on page eleven we see that five major approaches led into a junction at Fort Kearny and from there head west.<sup>15</sup> The north approach was from Omaha-Council Bluffs and became known as the Mormon Trail. Going south the next major route proceeded from old Fort Kearny, or Nebraska City west to the Platte and Fort Kearny. The third route as well as the fourth route were rather close to one another. The St. Joe Road and the Fort Leavenworth Road proceeded from both named places heading west until they joined with the fifth route, the Independence Road out of Kansas City. All three routes then headed northwest to Fort Kearny and then west. Fort Kearny was a very key road junction on the Great Platte River Road, and was the last major settlement prior to arriving at Fort Laramie. As a route the Great Platte River Road had three virtues: it was dry, it was level, and it ran in the right direction.

This natural highway to the Far West was not a single pathway.

Kim L. Naden in his "Experiencing Nebraska's Oregon Trail," noted that:

Rarely did the route follow a specific line...unless it was in narrow confines that made the wagons follow each other. Usually whenever the flow of emigrants made too deep of ruts then new trails would be made along side of the old ones. This sometimes made the trail literally hundreds of feet wider. Upon seeing the Trail for the first time many people expected to see what they had imagined, ie. a single road. Most were disillusioned.<sup>16</sup>

Estimates of the amount of travel on the Great Platte River Road between the early 1840's and the coming of the railroad in 1866 vary between 300,000 and 500,000. Unfortunately, there are few documentable

**HISTORIC PLACES**      ■      ■      ■  
**GREAT PLATTE RIVER ROAD**      —————  
**MISSOURI STATE BORDERS**      —————

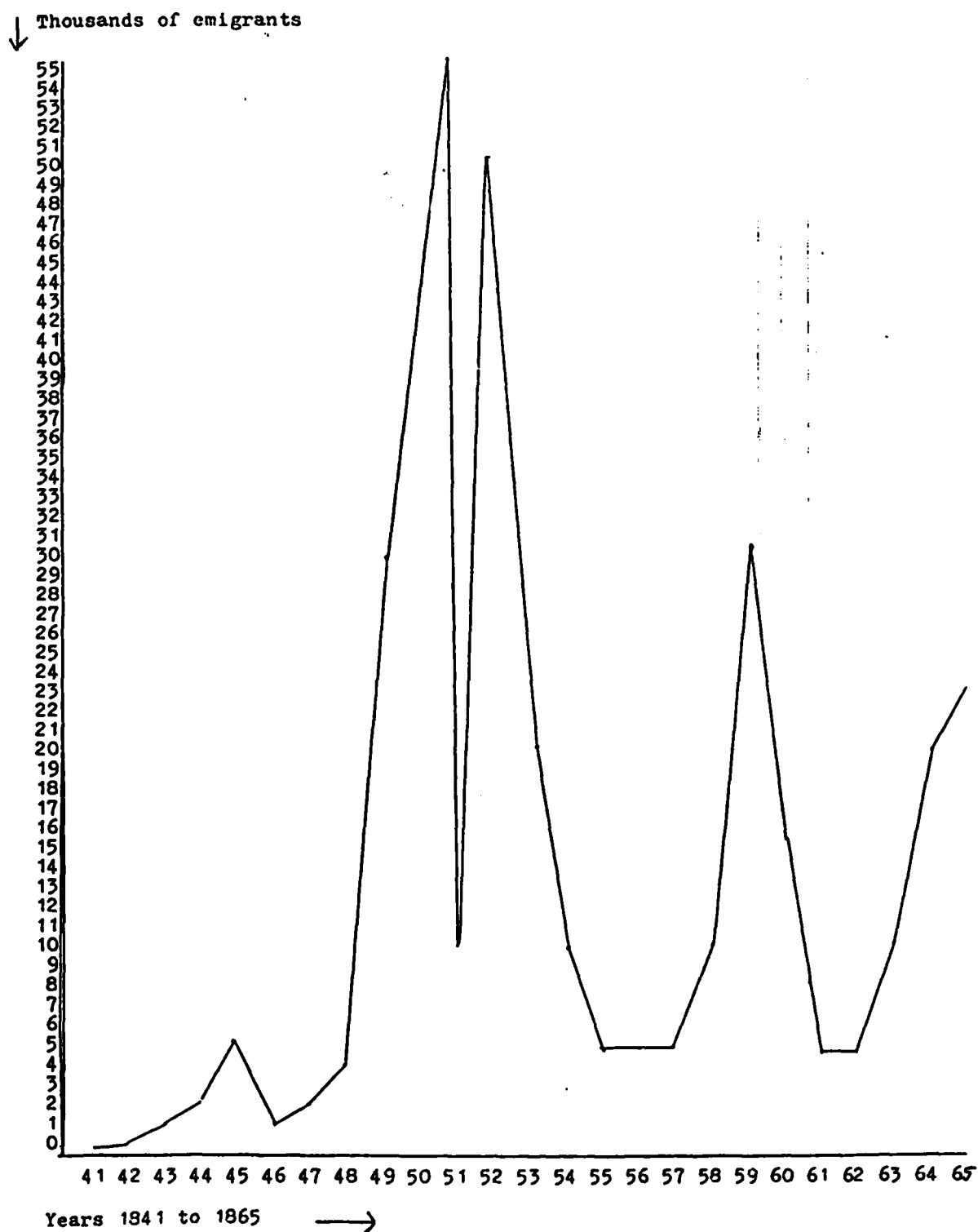
## HISTORIC PLACES

**GREAT PLATTE RIVER ROAD**

## MODERN STATE IDENTITIES

statistics from this time. Mattes, in The Great Platte River Road, conservatively estimates that there were 350,000 emigrants using the Great Platte River Road between 1849-1853. Using his figures and the graph on page thirteen, the reasons for concentrating on the years 1849-1853 are clearly apparent. From 1841-1848 there were some 15,300 people estimated to have used the trail. This breaks down into some 1,900 people a year, or approximately 4% of the total estimated traffic. In 1854 to 1866 these figures improve with 49% of the total estimated traffic using the road. These figures translate into 169,700 emigrants or 13,050 people per year. If you look at 1849-1853 there is a very dramatic upswing in road usage from 1841-1848 and on a yearly basis almost three times greater usage than 1854-1866. In 1849 to 1853 there were 165,000 emigrants using the road for an estimated total of 47% traffic usage, or 33,000 per year! The reasons for these large traffic totals during these years were primarily the mass migration to the California Gold Fields, and the Oregon-California emigration which contributed a sizeable minority. The figures that Mattes bases his data on are drawn from emigrant registers from Forts Kearny and Laramie, newspapers from Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, and Missouri, and also military reports. Accounts of the time also indicate these are the years of moderate to heavy travel on the Great Platte River Road.<sup>17</sup> All are in agreement that the years 1849 to 1853 were the peak years on the Great Platte River Road.

Having examined the land, its climate, and the paths through it, let us now look at the native inhabitants of the land known as Nebraska, the Indians.



GRAPH 1: Traffic Analysis, The Great Platte River Road, 1841-1865.

## Endnotes, Chapter I, "The Nebraska Frontier"

<sup>1</sup>Frank N. Schubert, Vanguard of Expansion (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1980), pp. 3-4. (Hereafter cited as Schubert, Vanguard of Expansion). See also Edwin James, Account of an Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains (Place and publisher unknown, 1823; reprint ed., Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), p. 361.

<sup>2</sup>James C. Olson, History of Nebraska, 2 ed. (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 7. (Hereafter cited as Olson, History of Nebraska).

<sup>3</sup>Olson, History of Nebraska, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup>Olson, History of Nebraska, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>Olson, History of Nebraska, pp. 7-8.

<sup>6</sup>Olson, History of Nebraska, p. 12. See also U.S., Senate Exec. Doc. No. 96. 34th Cong. 1st sess., Vol. 18, 1856 (Serial 827) "Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States, 1839-1855." (Washington, D.C.: A.O.P. Nicholson, Printer, 1856), pp. 548-601. The following data is drawn from this Report reference the weather at Fort Kearny, Nebraska in the years shown:

Year	Mean Temp F	Rainfall inches	Weather-days			
			fair	cloudy	rain	snow
1849	42.40	No data	217	148	49	12
1850	46.43	25.07	211	154	58	28
1851	No data	26.44	No data			
1852	46.38	20.65	191	175	60	33
1853	48.30	29.90	230	135	55	18

<sup>7</sup>Merrill J. Mattes, The Great Platte River Road (Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), p. 11. (Hereafter cited as Mattes, The Great Platte River Road).

<sup>8</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup>John C. Fremont, Report of the Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the years 1843-'44. (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1845; reprint ed., Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>Mattes, The Great Platt River Road, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup>Schubert, Vanguard of Expansion, p. 27.

<sup>12</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 14. See also, Charles J. Kappler, compiler, Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), II: 571-572.

<sup>13</sup>U.S., War Department, Quartermaster General, Annual Report, 1850. U.S. Serial as follows: House Exec. Doc. No. 1, 31st Cong., 2d sess., vol. 1 (Serial 595), p. 20. Original spellings are followed in this quote, and in all others found in this text.

<sup>14</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. XII.

<sup>15</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, pp. 1-11.

<sup>16</sup>Kim L. Naden, "Experiencing Nebraska's Oregon Trail," 1982, (Typewritten), p. 13. Mr. Naden's manuscript is currently in the possession of The Buffalo County Historical Society, Kearney, Nebraska.

<sup>17</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p.23. See also Albert Watkins, ed., Publications of the Nebraska State Historical Society, vol. XX. (Lincoln, Nebraska: Published by the Society, 1922), through the book.



## CHAPTER II

### THE INDIANS

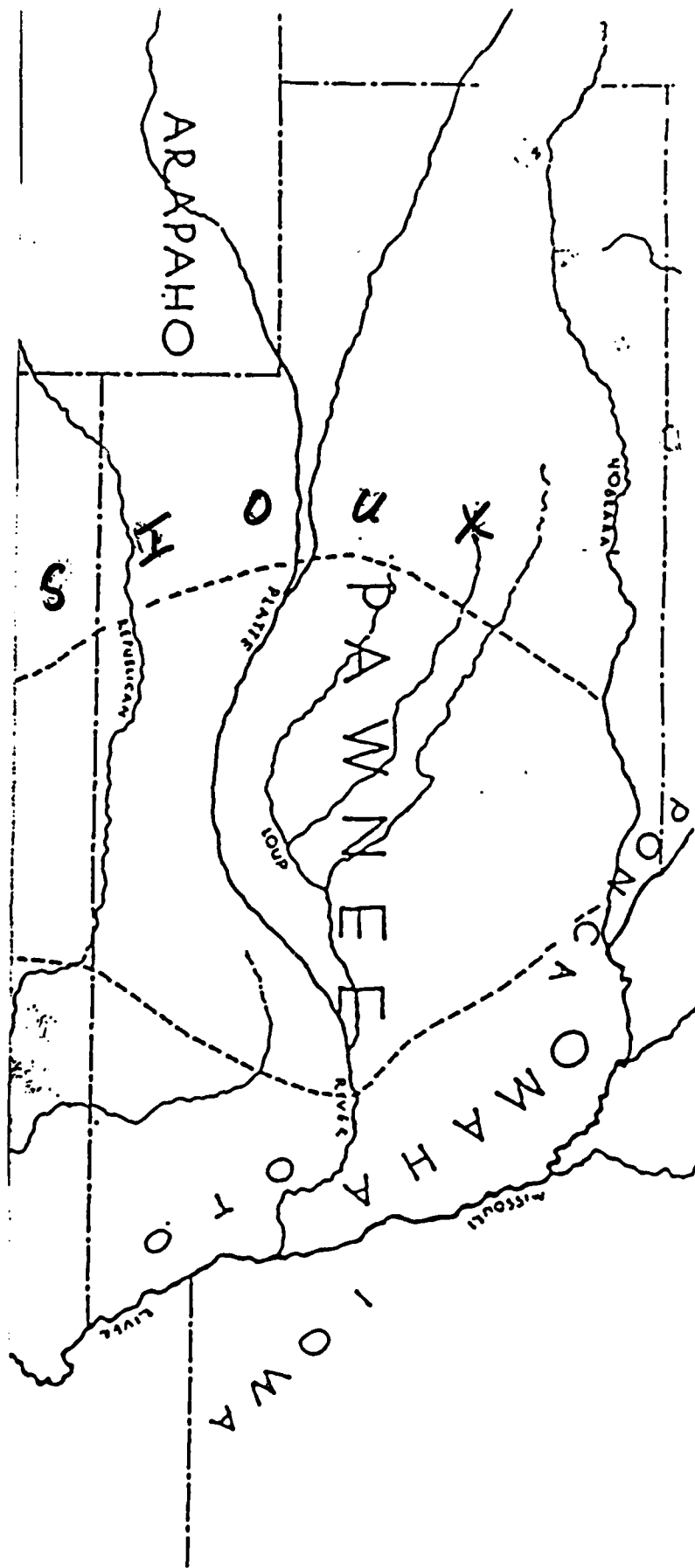
A study of the Indian tribes living in Nebraska during the years 1849 to 1853 produces few facts that can be stated with any degree of accuracy. Unfortunately, the Plains Indians of North America did not keep written records of their past. What little information that we have comes from the Indians' oral history and from those few U.S. Government agencies that were in contact with the Indians during the years 1849-1853. The history of the life of the Indians in Nebraska during these years can be written from these two sources.

Nebraska in these years, 1849-1853, was inhabited by two Indian family groups, the Caddoan family and the Siouan family.<sup>1</sup> Each family shared in a common root language with differing dialects existing in each tribe of the family. The Caddoan family in Nebraska was composed of the Pawnee tribes. As can be seen in the map on page eighteen, the Pawnee lived in central Nebraska along the Loup, Platte, and Republican Rivers.<sup>2</sup> Surrounding them on both sides, east and west, were members of the Siouan family; the Sioux, Ponca, Omaha, and Otos.<sup>3</sup> Thomas E. Mails in his work, The Mystic Warriors of the Plains, claims that the Plains Indians reached a "population peak" about 1800 A.D. Mails further estimates the size of each of these five tribes as follows:<sup>4</sup>

Sioux	27,000
Pawnee	10,000
Omaha	2,800
Oto	1,800
Ponca	800
Total estimated Indians in Nebraska, circa 1800-	42,400

Note that these are estimated numbers as well as estimated locations circa, 1800 shown on the map. None of these tribes left permanent marks upon the land showing where they were, nor did they readily submit to census counters during the years 1849-1853.

The Pawnee were a semi-nomadic peoples, they lived in earth lodge villages and tilled the soil, growing corn and beans, gathering wild fruits, hunting and fishing. The Pawnee also mounted large hunting expeditions for buffalo. The entire tribe never left their small villages en masse. The elderly, the young, and some women were left behind as the warriors went forth to hunt buffalo. Culturally the Pawnee were more advanced than their neighbors and possessed a highly developed political and religious organization.<sup>5</sup> The Pawnee also traded with the White fur traders giving buffalo and other fur pelts in return for trade goods, ie. metal utensils, firearms, and, unfortunately, whiskey. Additionally, like so many other Indian tribes, the Pawnee also were exposed to diseases such as smallpox, cholera, measles and venereal disease.



MAP 2: Pawnee and Sioux Indians in Nebraska, 1849-1853.

Originating in what is considered modern day Texas and Oklahoma, the Pawnee were living in Nebraska by at least 1600 A.D. There is some archaeological evidence that they may have been there as early as the 1400's.<sup>6</sup>

Looking for areas offering a good water supply, wood, forage for their horses, and protection from the wind, the Pawnee found that the river bottoms of Nebraska were sufficient to serve as a home.<sup>7</sup> With a food economy based on subsistence farming and the buffalo, the Pawnees' largest threat to semi-peaceful existence was their mortal enemies, the Sioux.

Following the threat of their neighbors was the menace of disease, and the Pawnees total reliance on land resources and the buffalo. If epidemic struck, the weather was bad, the crops failed, or if the buffalo failed to come in sufficient numbers, disaster would result. As a group the Pawnees' of Nebraska were in a period of decline during the 1840's and 1850's. This decline was due to two reasons: disease, from which the Pawnees' had no natural defenses; and the Sioux, for which their defenses were to no avail. Again referring to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs Annual Report of 1849, we see the comments of John E. Barrow, the Pawnee Indian agent.

This truly poor and persecuted people have suffered severely during the past spring and summer; besides the many attacks that have been made upon them by their enemies, the cholera has haunted them in their hunt, and swept them off like chaff before the wind.<sup>8</sup>

Barrow then goes on to say that the Pawnees' only numbered an estimated 4,500 people. If Mails' estimate of 10,000 in 1800 was true, then the Pawnee had suffered over a 50% loss of population in the space of less than forty years. Eventually the Pawnee would lose their hold on the Nebraska plains and would be moved to reservations in Oklahoma under the impetus of the Federal Government.<sup>9</sup>

What of the most populous of the Nebraska Plains Indians, the Siouan family? As previously stated, this Indian group was made up of the Sioux, Oto, Omaha, and Ponca tribes. Far and away the most numerous and powerful were the Sioux. The Sioux, along with the Pawnee, occupied most of the land in Nebraska. The Sioux were true nomads, living in tepees and following the buffalo, their chief means of subsistence. Believing that the buffalo was a natural symbol for the universe, the Sioux accorded the buffalo great respect. From the buffalo came the hides to make the Indian's bedding and clothing, the bones were made into knives, arrow-heads, and needles, the muscles provided thread, the hair could be made into ropes, the meat could be eaten, and the buffalo chips used to fuel the fire that cooked the buffalo meat.<sup>10</sup> Additionally the surplus buffalo hides could be traded to White trappers for firearms, trade goods and whiskey. The economy of the Sioux was heavily dependent upon the buffalo, which meant if the buffalo suffered so then did the Sioux. In contrast to the one commodity economy of the Sioux, the Oto, Omaha, and Poncas were not as dependent on the buffalo. These three tribes also grew the same crops as the Pawnee and in some respects were more akin to the Pawnee than the Sioux. The chief difference in the Indian tribes of Nebraska was in their degree of nomadic mobility. The Sioux being a more nomadic people than the Pawnee, were also more mobile, possessing more horses and developing a more savage warrior class. The Pawnees were in all likelihood more culturally advanced than the Sioux. but the Sioux were a more robust and aggressive culture.

Coming into Nebraska in the 1830's from the Dakotas and Minnesota, the Sioux, also known as the Teton Sioux, were pushing south looking for new hunting grounds.<sup>11</sup> Finding scattered bands of Cheyenne, Arapahoes, and Pawnee, the Sioux moved into Nebraska and drove the Cheyenne, Arapahoes

and Pawnee out. Eventually the Cheyenne, Arapahoes, and the Pawnees all moved south of the Platte River. Of the Sioux their Indian Agent, Thomas Fitzpatrick, had this to say in his Annual Report of 1850:

The Indians occupying the Upper Platte...are very numerous and very formidable. They subsist entirely by the chase, and have no permanent abode whatever. They follow the game from place to place, and as it becomes scarce they are compelled to increase their movements.<sup>12</sup>

One major hazard existed for the Sioux during the years 1849-1853, disease. The White man brought the niceties of his culture and the rotten part of his life. The years 1849-1850 were particularly bad for the Sioux. The cholera epidemic of 1849 was followed by epidemics of smallpox and measles in 1850.<sup>13</sup> Sioux died in untold numbers. Since they were a more mobile people than the Pawnee, it is hard to estimate how many they lost. Among a group of people with no natural immunities to these diseases, the results can easily be imagined.

Intertribal warfare also took its toll among the Sioux. Commanding a savage warrior class the Sioux fought with every tribe of Indians they came in contact with. The Pawnee's and the Crows, however, were their chief foes.<sup>14</sup> The conflict between the Sioux and Pawnee in Nebraska centered about two issues: hunting rights, and trading rights with the Whites. With both Sioux and Pawnee using a limited resource, the buffalo, it is natural that they would come into conflict. This contest increased as the numbers of buffalo declined during the nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> Fighting between the two groups was almost always one-sided; the Sioux usually beat the Pawnee whenever they battled. The Sioux had more horses, which meant that they were more mobile than the Pawnee. In a land devoid of natural defensive terrain, the advantage lay with the attacker; this advantage would increase with greater mobility. Another reason for strife

between the Sioux and the Pawnee was the fight over trading rights with the White traders. These traders and trappers were a source of firearms, powder and shot, iron goods, knives, and whiskey. The tribe that had muskets had a greater advantage in war and the hunt than a tribe armed with lances and arrows. Since the White traders used the waterways to transport their furs and trading goods, the tribe that controlled both the fur supply and the rivers had an overwhelming advantage over the others in Nebraska. The Sioux by the 1850's were well on their way to controlling both the fur supply and the waterways.

The Pawnee failed to survive the Sioux onslaught for three reasons. First, the Sioux outnumbered the Pawnee. Second, the Sioux were better equipped with firearms and horses than the Pawnee. Third, Pawnee villages were by their nature difficult to defend and easy prey for the attacker. The set-up of Pawnee villages was inherently flawed for their defense. Noted Indian expert George E. Hyde in his book, The Pawnee Indians, had this to say of the Pawnee villages:

when war came the Caddoan villages often proved to be mere death-traps for their inhabitants. They were fixed targets, places at which the wandering tribes knew that they would find the Caddoan people at certain seasons of the year, and off their guard. The ancient Caddoan custom of setting their big grass-lodges widely spaced apart among the patches of cultivation on low valley-land made it impossible to defend the settlements...<sup>16</sup>

Not until much later did the Pawnee learn to form their villages on easily defended high ground. In the 1860's Pawnee warriors enlisted in the Pawnee Scouts under the leadership of the North brothers, to fight the Sioux and Cheyenne. With proper arms and strong leadership the Pawnee developed a reputation for skill and prowess in battle.<sup>17</sup> All the Pawnee needed was the right equipment and the right commanders; the spirit was there

but not the means. The result, at least until the 1860's, however, was the defeat and destruction of the Pawnee.

During the period 1849-1853 both the Sioux and Pawnee got along fairly well with the White travelers and inhabitants of Nebraska. First contact during the nineteenth century for the Indians in Nebraska was with the fur trappers. Both the Sioux and Pawnee welcomed these encounters with the trappers. Each side had something that the other wanted; the trappers wanted furs, the Indians wanted firearms, iron, and whiskey. As long as each party had goods to trade, the trade would continue. Eventually, however, the fur supply ran out and the trade ended.

By the 1840's, especially after 1848, there was a permanent military presence in Nebraska along the Platte River. With the exception of Fort Atkinson along the Missouri River in 1819-1827, and an occasional patrol or reconnaissance, few Indians came in contact with the U.S. Army. The military was sent to Nebraska to provide protection for the emigrants using the Great Platte River Road. It was with the emigrant that the Indians had the most frequent contacts between 1849-1853. Emigrant reactions ranged from outright hostility to abject fear of any Indian met on the Great Platte River Road. Many emigrant trains, or groups of wagons, were very well armed and in some cases overly so. As long as the emigrants did not seek combat with the Indians, and the Indians did not see any weakness in emigrant defense, there were few if any conflicts between the two. Most Indians, notably the Pawnee, saw the emigrants as an easy source of wanted supplies and delicacies. Usually the Pawnee would beg for supplies or anything else they could get. However, if they could catch a small emigrant train or a lone emigrant unaware and undefended, the Pawnee would exhibit hostility. The Pawnee during this time were desperate and slowly starving under the



stranglehold of the Sioux. In a copy of a letter written by emigrant S. V. Miller on November 24, 1852, we find the following description of the Indians of Nebraska.

West of Elk Horn and on the river we saw the first Pawnee. They are numerous and occupy a great extent of the country. They are a black, tall, slim Indian, a very sneaking, begarrarly, thieving class of beings...They let on to be very friendly, but if they could get any emigrant out where they could strip them they did not fail to do so and in some cases would even kill.

From Loup Fork (which we came up some 60 miles and crossed, then struck to Platte 35 miles in southwesterly direction) the Sioux Indians inhabit to Fort Laramie. They are a large, fine looking Indian; they are also a very numerous tribe of Indians. They are trying to kill all the Pawnee. (I wish them great success in that pious work.).<sup>18</sup>

Driven by the desperateness of their fate, the Pawnee were the most active aggressors against the emigrant and the U.S. Army. Two recorded engagements are listed during the years 1849-1853 between the Army and the Pawnee. Both fights occurred in October, 1849, not far from Fort Kearny. The first skirmish was between Company B, 1st Dragoons and the Pawnee on the Little Blue River near present day Linden, Nebraska. There were no known casualties in this battle. The second fight on October 29, 1849 once again occurred between the Pawnee and Company B, 1st Dragoons. This battle saw one soldier killed, several wounded, and no known Indian casualties.<sup>19</sup> After these two engagements there were no recorded instances of Indian hostilities in Nebraska until 1854-1855 when hostilities commenced with the Sioux. Why this hiatus occurred between 1850-1854 is conjectural; most probably it is due to two reasons—the epidemics of 1848-1850 and the treaties drawn up between the Indians and the Whites.

The Treaty With The Pawnee was signed on August 6, 1848, at Fort Kearny. This treaty was drawn up between Lieutenant Colonel Ludwell E. Powell, Missouri Mounted Volunteers, and the four chiefs of four

different Pawnee bands. This was an agreement that ceded the land in and about Fort Kearny to the U.S. Government along with the water and timber rights. In return the Pawnee were paid \$2,000.00 in goods and merchandise, or some \$500.00 per tribe. The Pawnee further agreed to "not molest or injure the property or person of any white citizen of the United States, whenever found, nor to make war upon any tribe with whom said Pawnee tribes now are, or may hereafter be at peace..."<sup>20</sup> As evidenced by the battles fought between the Pawnee and the Army in October, 1849, this was not an effective treaty. The problem with this treaty, as with all other treaties with the Indians, was the lack of control the chiefs exercised over their Indians. Also contributing to the problem was a lack of understanding by both the Indians and the Whites as to exact limiting factors of their agreement. When the four Pawnee chiefs signed for their four bands they were signing primarily to receive \$500.00 worth of "goods and merchandise." The concept of land ownership was alien to most Indian cultures. As far as the Pawnee were concerned, they were not giving anything away, they were gaining. Most important, however, is the concept by the Whites that the Pawnee chiefs controlled all of the Pawnee in the area of Fort Kearny. The chiefs only controlled, in a very limited way, the Indians in their own bands. These four chiefs had no control over the other Pawnees that might wander into the area. Therefore both parties to this 1848 treaty left with a flawed interpretation of the exact parameters of their mutual compact.

The Sioux also had their own treaty with the Whites, the Treaty of Fort Laramie. Signed on September 17, 1851, this was an agreement between the U.S. Government — represented by D. D. Mitchell, Superintendent of Indian Affairs, and Thomas Fitzpatrick, Agent to the Indians of the Upper Platte —

and the chiefs of the Sioux, Cheyenne, Arapahoes, Crows, Assinsboins, Mandans and Arrickara Indians. The treaty gave an annuity of \$50,000.00 per year for ten years to the assembled tribes in payment for the following actions. First, the Indians were to observe the peace among themselves and the Whites. Second, the Indians recognized the right of the U.S. Government to establish roads and military posts in their territories. Third, the U.S. Government bound themselves to protect the Indians from the Whites. Fourth, boundaries of tribal lands were established. And fifth, the hunting and fishing rights and right of passage of the Indians were acknowledged and defined. Any violation of the treaty by the Indians would result in the withholding of the annuities in whole or portion thereof.<sup>21</sup>

The Treaty of Fort Laramie agreements stayed in effect longer than the previous Treaty With The Pawnee of 1848. The same flaws that applied to the Pawnee treaty also applied to the Fort Laramie Treaty. The treaty also bound the Indians to accept White arbitration for conflicts between themselves and the emigrants. Would the Indians accept the results of this arbitration? As the Grattan Massacre of 1854 shows, neither the Sioux or the U.S. Army could or would accept arbitration.

The result of this lack of understanding between two separate peoples, combined with the ecological impact of thousands of emigrants passing through their land, would inevitably lead to conflict between the Indians and the Whites. As pointed out in the previous chapter there were 165,000 people crossing the Nebraska frontier in the years 1849-1853. All of those people, plus their draft animals, used up quite a lot of the limited natural resources of the area. The grazing areas, lumber and watering areas, which the Indians had been the sole users of, were now being used and in some cases destroyed, by the emigrants. Both emigrants and Indians, therefore, were

competing for the use of a limited resource. The buffalo was a key issue for the Indians' existence depended on the ready availability of this animal. Emigrants hunted the buffalo for its meat, the emigrant animals ate the grass from the buffalo's grazing areas. For these reasons the buffalo decreased in numbers. A decrease in the size of the buffalo herds meant trouble for the Indians dependent upon them. Indian survival therefore keyed upon the emigrant crossing his lands. The more emigrants there were, the fewer buffalo there would be.

This competition for a limited ecological resource would continue to grow as long as White emigration passed through Nebraska. With less and less buffalo each year, the Indians would either have to find another source of supply like the buffalo, or destroy the force that was killing the buffalo. There was no readily available resource open to the Indians in Nebraska that could provide everything the buffalo did. To move to another hunting ground would bring the Indians into conflict with other Indians using the same hunting ground. One of the few viable options left to the Indians, therefore, was to get rid of the force destroying the buffalo. It was only a matter of time, therefore, before conflict resulted.

## Endnotes, Chapter II, "The Indians"

<sup>1</sup>Thomas E. Mails, The Mystic Warriors of the Plains (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1973), p. 14. (Hereafter cited as Mails, The Mystic Warriors). See also George E. Hyde, The Pawnee Indians, 2d ed. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974), p. 110. (Hereafter cited as Hyde, The Pawnee Indians).

<sup>2</sup>Hyde, The Pawnee Indians, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup>Hyde, The Pawnee Indians, pp. 110-111.

<sup>4</sup>Mails, The Mystic Warriors, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>Hyde, The Pawnee Indians, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup>Hyde, The Pawnee Indians, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>Mails, The Mystic Warriors, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>U.S., Department of the Interior, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1849 (Washington, D.C.: Gideon & Co., 1850), pp. 139-140. (Hereafter cited as CIA, Annual Report).

<sup>9</sup>Hyde, The Pawnee Indians, p. 321. The story of this move is further amplified in Hyde's Chapter XII, "Blown Away Southward" of The Pawnee Indians.

<sup>10</sup>Mails, The Mystic Warriors, pp. 188-191.

<sup>11</sup>George E. Hyde, Red Cloud's Folk (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1937), p. 46. (Hereafter cited as Hyde, Red Cloud's Folk). The Sioux referred to in Nebraska are part of the Dakota Sioux during these years.

<sup>12</sup>U.S. Department of the Interior, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1850 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1850), p. 24. (Hereafter cited as CIA, Annual Report, 1850).

<sup>13</sup>CIA, Annual Report, 1850, p. 18. See also Hyde, Red Cloud's Folk, p. 64.

<sup>14</sup>Mails, The Mystic Warriors, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup>Mails, The Mystic Warriors, pp. 581-582.

<sup>16</sup>Hyde, The Pawnee People, pp. 3-4.

<sup>17</sup>Hyde, The Pawnee People, pp. 4-5.

<sup>18</sup>S. V. Miller, "Copy of a letter written by S. V. Miller to his parents from Salem, Oregon, November 24, 1852." Wyoming Historical Society Association (1919): 31.

<sup>19</sup>George W. Webb, Chronological list of engagements between the Regular Army of the United States and various tribes of hostile Indians which occurred during the years 1790 to 1898, inclusive (St. Joseph, Missouri: Wing Press, 1939; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, 1976), p. 10.

<sup>20</sup>Charles J. Kappler, compiler. Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), II: 571-572. (Hereafter cited as Kappler, Indian Affairs).

<sup>21</sup>Kappler, Indian Affairs, II: 595-597.

<sup>22</sup>U.S. Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1850 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1850), p. 122. This report speaks of the diminishing numbers of buffalo and its effect on the Indian tribes.

## CHAPTER III

### EMIGRANTS AND THE NEBRASKA FRONTIER 1849-1853

The age of westward migration across the American continent is a period rich in history and folklore. Here could be found legends and tales of heroism that grew with the passage of time. To find the truth behind western literary fiction and media attempts to portray the West, one must examine the people and documents of the time. The American westward migratory pattern had three separate waves of people.<sup>1</sup> These three waves or classes of people can be broken down as follows. The first group to blaze new trails into the unexplored wilderness were commercial travelers. Commercial in this case being defined as fur trappers, small scale cattle herders, and small subsistence farmers/hunters. Much later these people would be followed by freighters who would move the furs and surplus crops out of the wilderness and back to civilization. Following the commercial traveler would be the military. At first all that this would consist of would be small patrols, but these patrols were more than just a party to show the flag. The importance of the first patrols lay in their mission to explore and map the new lands and trails. Much has been written of the actions of these patrols as they opened up new territory to those who followed. Little has been written of the great importance of the maps and guidebooks these exploring parties produced. The third class of traveler, the emigrant, would have had a more difficult time traversing the Great Platte River Road without the aid of the maps prepared by Army topographic engineers. Of importance also are the

outposts the military established in and along the frontier. These small and isolated posts were a haven for all seeking protection and aid. Posts such as Forts Kearny and Laramie were especially welcome sights for emigrants along the Great Platte River Road.

It is the purpose of this chapter to concentrate on the third type of travelers in Nebraska during the years 1849-1853, the emigrant.

Merrill J. Mattes in his book, The Great Platte River Road, defines the emigrant as "anyone, American or foreign, whose principal object was to cross the continent to improve his fortune."<sup>2</sup> Whether searching for a new home or going to find their fortune in a gold field or silver mine, the emigrants had one thing in common. All were traveling west to improve their lifestyle from what it had been before.

The years we are examining, 1849-1853, were the years of heaviest road traffic along the Great Platte River Road. Perhaps the best estimate of road traffic in these years comes from Mattes's The Great Platte River Road.<sup>3</sup> Herein reproduced are Mattes's estimates for 1849-1853:

<u>Year</u>	<u>Estimated number of emigrants</u>
1849	30,000
1850	55,000
1851	10,000
1852	50,000
1853	<u>20,000</u>
	165,000 Total

(These estimates are based on Mattes's study of newspaper accounts, emigrant journals, diaries, and government estimates)



The grand total road traffic along the Great Platte River Road between the years 1841 and 1866 is estimated at 350,000 men, women, and children. Almost half of these people migrated in the years 1849 to 1853. ( $165,000/350,000 = 45\%$ ). The people making up this vast exodus during this five year span, 1849-1853, were of three different types. First, and most numerous, was the California emigrant in search of gold. These were the famous "49' ers," a largely male gathering drawn to the gold regions of California by greed and a sense of adventure. The years 1849 and 1850 saw the greatest number of emigrants on the trail. Second, was the emigrant moving toward Oregon and Washington State. In contrast to the "49'ers" theirs was a family migration and they moved in the years 1852 and 1853. The third and smallest migratory group was the Utah emigrant. Almost entirely Mormon, the years of their exodus occurred in 1847-1848, but there were still a few coming along the Great Platte River Road heading for Salt Lake City and Utah in 1849 to 1853.

Where did they come from, these 165,000 emigrants? Beginning with the California Gold Rush emigrants, the bulk of the overland traffic came out of the states of Missouri, Iowa, Wisconsin, Illinois, and the upper Mississippi Valley. There were a few robust groups of emigrants who came from Massachusetts, New York, Virginia, and Washington, D.C., but the majority of those who lived on the East Coast preferred to go to California via clipper ships out of New York, Boston, and Charleston.<sup>4</sup> The biggest year statistically for those seeking their fortunes in California was 1850. In most aspects it was a repeat on a large scale of 1849. Unfortunately, it was a disastrous year for those on the Great Platte River Road; Asiatic cholera was widespread and rainfall was sparse. Cholera victims died by the hundreds, perhaps thousands, while herds of animals died from lack

of water.<sup>5</sup> A large decline in road traffic occurred in 1851 on the Great Platte River Road due largely to the twin calamities of Asiatic cholera and the drought of 1850. By the following year, 1852, the numbers were up again with large numbers of California emigrants. There were also a sizeable number of emigrants heading for Oregon and Washington State. A decline in emigration occurred in 1853, possibly due to the playing out of the California Gold Fields. Again this was a year for emigration to Oregon and Washington.<sup>6</sup> And again if you look at emigrant origins based on newspaper accounts, emigrant diaries, and other legal documents, by far the largest number of those emigrating were from the midwest.<sup>7</sup> John Faragher in his book, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, gives the following data showing a representative sample of 122 emigrants and their origins in 1852.

<u>State</u>	<u>Numbers of Emigrants</u>	<u>%</u>
Missouri	27	23.5
Illinois	26	22.5
Iowa	18	15.7
Indiana	14	12.2
Michigan	6	5.2
Arkansas	5	4.4
Wisconsin	5	4.4
Other state (9)	<u>14</u>	<u>12.2</u>
Subtotal	115	100.2
Not known	7	
Total records examined	122	

(Diaries, journals, emigrant accounts)

For those emigrating to the West there were other ways one could go from one side of the continent to the other. If the Great Platte River Road was not to their liking, the emigrant could elect to cross overland via the southwestern trails, i.e., Santa Fe, Gila and Spanish Trails. Those who took these trails had to contend with two obstacles: lack of water and hostile Indians. Most of the routes covered lands that were noted for their arid and desert like conditions. If they did not have a guide who knew where all the water holes were, or if the water holes had dried up, an emigrant party could find itself in a great deal of trouble. In contrast to the Indians of the Plains, the Indians of the Southwest were vastly more hostile during this time than were the Plains Indians. The U.S. Army was actively involved in the 1850's in a war against the Navaho who occupied a great deal of the southwestern part of the United States. The Navaho and their more savage neighbors, the Apache, would be a source of trouble to the U.S. Government for many years. Not until the late 1880's would this area be completely safe for white emigration. The only other major route option was a long sea voyage around Cape Horn. John Unruh in his book, The Plains Across, estimates that 28,000 people went by sea in the years 1849 and 1850.<sup>8</sup> The problem with going to the West Coast by sea in these years was two-fold. Time and cost are the barriers with this option. In the early days of the California Gold Rush ships of all types were crammed to capacity. Many of the ships used were unsafe, poorly manned and almost always crowded beyond capacity. Buying a ticket on these ships was a costly proposition because they were in such high demand. Ticket prices could range anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 from an East Coast port to San Francisco. The amount of time it took to get from coast to coast by way of Cape Horn ranged from 117 to 355 days.

After 1851 the option was opened to go by sea via the Isthmus of Panama rather than the Cape Horn route. Even this route was noted for its long waiting periods, in this case waiting for a ship to pick you up on the Pacific side of the Isthmus. Malaria, yellow fever, poor sanitation, expensive food, and a volatile political situation gave this passage some dangers unique unto itself.<sup>9</sup> When you compare the cost and time of passage between crossing the Plains and sailing to the West Coast, it is easy to see why more than two-thirds of all emigrants went overland, rather than by sea. An overland voyage averaged about 124.6 days from the Missouri River to California-Oregon. And the cost for a family or group of four would run about \$600 total.<sup>10</sup>

The travelers, whether they went by sea or overland came from all walks of life. Most were farmers or planters, followed by the professions; doctors, lawyers and teachers. Faragher's Table AI.2. "Occupations of Emigrant Male Heads of Household" in, Women and Men on the Overland Trail gives the following data "showing a representative of 122 emigrants in 1852."

<u>Occupation</u>	<u>Number of Emigrants</u>	<u>%</u>
Farmer	54	60.7
Professional	11	12.4
Craftsman	9	10.1
Small merchant	8	9.0
Minister	<u>7</u>	<u>7.9</u>
subtotal	89	100.1
Not known	33	
Total	122	

Although Faragher does not cover all of the emigrants that crossed the Great Platte River Road, he does get a representative sample. This sample and its results are in agreement with the findings of most historians.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the social class or experience level the emigrants set out to cross the trail as quickly and as safely as possible. The starting points for their trip were usually one of five places along the Missouri River. The starting points for emigrants along the Great Platte River Road were: Omaha/Council Bluffs, Nebraska City, Nebraska (old Fort Kearny); St. Joseph, Missouri; Weston, Missouri; and Westport, Kansas. Looking at the map in Chapter I, "The Nebraska Frontier" it is clearly apparent that each of these five areas had several crossing points across the Missouri River. Logically one would expect that most emigrants would leave from Omaha/Council Bluffs or Nebraska City, Nebraska. Geography alone dictates that the further north one goes on the Missouri River, the further west you also go. Leaving from Omaha/Council Bluffs you were already sixty miles west of Westport, Kansas. The choice between these five major outfitting posts and start points was determined by the emigrant based on:

the basis of reputation, convincing advertising, or rumors of where the lowest prices, fewest cholera cases, and smallest number of fellow outfitters would be found.<sup>12</sup>

Materials gathered from emigrant journals, diaries, and letters all indicate that in 1849 the number one choice of starting point was St. Joseph, with Westport (Kansas City) second, and Omaha/Council Bluffs third. In 1850 Westport declined while St. Joseph and Omaha/Council Bluffs were in a race for first. By 1852 and beyond, Omaha/Council Bluffs maintained an unbeatable lead.<sup>13</sup> Without exception almost all of the emigrants did two things when they arrived at their starting or "jumping-

off" point. They outfitted themselves with the equipment they would need and organized themselves into groups or companies of fellow travelers.

On May 12, 1849 George Winslow, a California emigrant, wrote to his wife in Boston concerning his outfitting:

we have brought 40 mules & 6 horses and will have two more horses by monday. our mules average us \$52 each we have also 4 waggons and perhaps may buy another: one of our waggons left Camp to day... we shall probably get underway next Tuesday or Wednesday:<sup>14</sup>

Outfitting oneself with a unit of rolling stock: wagon, animals, and supplies, was of prime importance to an emigrant. A good bargain in St. Joseph might not be so good if it was too heavy to get across the South Pass, or if it broke down along the Platte. There were three types of animals used to pull wagons along the Great Platte River Road: horses, mules, and oxen. Comparing the three in turn, the horse was an excellent animal; unfortunately, it was an expensive animal. A horse of medium quality might cost as much as \$200 and the upkeep was equally costly. American horses were grain eaters, and unless the emigrant carried sufficient grain for the horse, the horse was useless. Horses, unless they were Indian bred, just did not forage well on dry prairie grass, insects bothered them, and the waters of the Platte gave them distemper. This is not to say that horses were not used; most emigrant trains or companies had a few along to use as outriders for security, or for herding cattle. Next on the list were mules, a hardy and long lasting animal. Mules did survive on prairie grasses and small amounts of alkali waters, but they also had their faults. The temperament of mules was described by many of the emigrants who used them. Their descriptions center on such words as stubborn, irascible, and heartbreaking. Cost for a mule ranged from \$50-\$125 each, with a higher priced mule being one that had been broken

to the pack or wagon.<sup>15</sup> Most emigrants found that all they could buy were unbroken mules, so one of the first things they did was to break these mules.

For two days we - or some mexicans that we engaged have been busily employed breaking 10 mules; it was laughable to see the brutes perform. To harness them the Mex's tied their fore legs together and throwed them down the fellows then got on them rung their ears (which like a niggers shin is the tenderous part) by that time they were docile enough to take the Harness. The animal in many respects resemble a sheep: they are timid and when frightened will sometime kick like thunder... After they are broken they are of the two more gentle than the Horse.<sup>16</sup>

Oxen of all three means of animal power were the most popular and widely used animal along the Great Platte River Road. Estimates of their use centered around 60% with horses and mules having 20% of the total respectively. Oxen were hardy, strong, docile, and inexpensive at \$50-\$60 each. The only disadvantages to oxen were their slowness and a tendency to become reckless when thirsty. These disadvantages were offset by the fact that the oxen were less likely to stampede than were horses and mules. Moreover, the Indians did not like stealing oxen; horses and mules were more to their liking.<sup>17</sup> Most emigrant groups used oxen as noted, but also took along a few horses to use for various utility tasks along the trail.

The wagons pulled by these creatures were not the Conestoga large-wheeled and boat-shaped wagons of legend; these were the type of wagons used by freighters. Most emigrants used a straight-bed wagon that was both smaller and lighter than the Conestoga. Made of hardwood and hooped, the wagons were covered with a variety of materials, among them being canvas, linen, muslin, and oilcloth. A good wagon with all of its gear might cost about \$190. Next to the animals this was the second major purchase of an

emigrant.<sup>18</sup> Gear for the wagon would include items such as spare parts, such as tongue, spokes, and axles. Grease buckets and grease, water barrels, whips, ropes, and chains would complete the gear.<sup>19</sup> This vehicle had to carry a load of four people and anywhere from 1,600 to 2,200 pounds of food and equipment. Only the most essential items could be taken; a good rule of thumb while traveling on the Great Platte River Road was to travel light. The lighter you started out, the greater your chances of seeing the end of the journey.

Mention must be made of those few who traveled the Great Platte River Road without wagons. Many with wagons walked along the side of their heavily loaded vehicles. But there were a few who started out with what they could carry on their backs, or on a pack animal's back. Some, most notably the Mormons, negotiated the Great Platte River Road with handcarts. There was even a man with a wheel-barrow, observed by some emigrants in 1850, who walked along the Great Platte River Road. With the exception of the Mormons there are no known written accounts of others who traveled the Great Platte River Road on foot.

What was carried in a wagon that could amount to over one ton of deadweight? Faragher in his, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, had compiled a list of recommended supplies for a group of four. This list is drawn from guidebooks of the day and is fairly complete.<sup>20</sup>



Table 1

Inventory of Essential Outfit, Costs, and Weights: emigrant party of four

<u>Area</u>	<u>Item</u>	<u>Amount</u>	<u>Unit Cost</u>	<u>Cost (\$)</u>	<u>Weight (lbs)</u>
Transport	wagon	1	90.0	90.00	
	oxen	4 yoke	50.00/yoke	200.00	
	gear		100.00	100.00	
Food	flour	600 lbs.	2.00/100 lbs.	12.00	600
	biscuits	120 lbs.	3.00/100 lbs.	3.60	120
	bacon	400 lbs.	5.00/100 lbs.	20.00	400
	coffee	60 lbs.	7.00/100 lbs.	4.20	60
	tea	4 lbs.	50.00/100 lbs.	2.00	4
	sugar	100 lbs.	10.00/100 lbs.	10.00	100
	lard	200 lbs.	6.00/100 lbs.	12.00	200
	beans	200 lbs.	8.00/100 lbs.	16.00	200
	dried fruit	120 lbs.	24.00/100 lbs.	28.80	120
	salt	40 lbs.	4.00/100 lbs.	1.60	40
	pepper	8 lbs.	4.00/100 lbs.	.32	8
	saleratus	8 lbs.	4.00/100 lbs.	.32	8
	whiskey	1 keg	5.00/keg	5.00	25
Goods	rifle	1	30.00	30.00	10
	pistols	2	15.00	30.00	10
	power	5 lbs.	.25/lb.	1.25	5
	lead	15 lbs.	.04/lb.	.60	15
	shot	10 lbs.	.10/lb	1.00	10
	matches			1.00	1
	cooking utensils			20.00	25
	candles/soap	65 lbs.			65
	bedding	60 lbs.			60
	sewing kit	10 lbs.			10
	tools				20
	clothing				100
TOTALS				\$589.69	2,216 lbs.

From what is shown in this list a series of conclusions can be drawn. First, although crossing the Great Platte River Road was cheaper than going by ship, it was still expensive by the standards of the day to travel overland to California-Oregon. This list, is an average grouping of items, costs, and weights, although it is probable that there those who spent more and carried more. Not everyone could afford \$148, the cost of moving overland assuming each wagon carried an average of four people. It would be logical to assume that this is a good average; fewer than four would have a hard time trying to maintain the wagon and guard the camp at night. More than four would seriously overload the wagons. Emigrants had to be extremely careful with what they took along in their wagons. Enough provisions had to be carried to last through the journey, but these had to be cut to a bare minimum. Extra equipment and comfort items were not permissible given the weight limitations. Many emigrants took along iron stoves, furniture, trunks full of clothing; the price for this extravagance was either the failure of the wagon under too much weight, or the abandonment of goods along the trail. Usually by the time the emigrant had reached Fort Kearny he had gotten rid of his excess weight. On Monday, May 28, 1849, John H. Benson, a California emigrant, wrote in his diary about overloaded wagons:<sup>21</sup>

The emigrants find they are too heavily loaded. Many of them are doubling teams and are leaving part of their wagons. They are offering wagons and supplies at any price they will bring. I saw one advertisement posted:

100 lbs. of flour	50 cents
100 lbs. of bacon	50 cents
100 lbs. of dried beef	50 cents

Other emigrants also wrote of their overloading problems.

"Monday. June 4, 1849

To day we are laying in Camp for the purpose of overhauling our wagons & some throwing away of provisions. At night there were several bonfires about camp. Huge piles Bacon are fired & affords a fine light...<sup>22</sup>

The road to day was lined with waggons Chains Trunks and old guns. here they left there waggons and packed on there teams.<sup>23</sup>

The lighter one traveled, the greater the chance of seeing one's destination. Once the emigrant had his personal outfit together, then the emigrant started to band together in companies or trains to move together on to a common destination. Many of these companies were formed from alike bodies of emigrants, such as from the same area or city. Some were formed at jumping off points along the Missouri River. Mutual advancement and protection were the avowed reasons for forming these groups. The average company was about fifteen to twenty-five wagons of four men each. Each wagon was a "mess" or a team; usually each man in the mess contributed part of the capital to purchase the equipment to go on the trip. As with most organizations there was a document of some type that set out the rules and codes of conduct expected on the trail. Many companies organized themselves along military lines with a captain commanding the organization and several lieutenants and sergeants to assist him. John Steele, a California emigrant from Wisconsin, wrote in his diary of May 17, 1850, from Omaha with the following:

An inspection was made of the teams, wagons, and supplies. Each wagon was found in suitable condition for the journey, with the stated supply of provisions, and to each not more than four persons. With this necessary preparation, they all signed articles of agreement, solemnly pledging themselves to assist each other in case of loss of team, wagon, provisions, or in sickness or accident. The promise was, no doubt, given in good faith, but it was not long until the day of trial told how easily by some, it could be broken.

Hiram Fierry was elected captain, William Kingbury lieutenant, G. Hayden and I. J. Hughes, first and second sergeants. The wagons were then arranged in four divisions, seven in each, that they might alternate in taking the lead, and all have equal advantage on the road.<sup>24</sup>

There were advantages and disadvantages to forming these organizations. A large company would be better able to protect itself from Indian attack. If one or more members became ill, or if misfortune struck a wagon, the large organizations were better able to care for their problems. The chief disadvantage was speed; smaller companies moved faster. The result was that as the organizations moved closer to their destinations, the companies started to break apart in an effort to gain more speed. Even when the danger of Indian attack increased, as in the 1860's, the emigrant distained safety in favor of speed. Despite orders from the military at Fort Kearny this dictum could not be enforced once past eyesight of the post.<sup>25</sup>

Timing of the journey was critical for these emigrants; they had to leave soon enough to get across the mountains before the winter snows, that is prior to the first of October. They also had to take into account the spring floods on the prairies along with the availability of new spring grasses to feed the animals. If you compute the distance from the Missouri River to California-Oregon at about 2000 miles, with the average daily haul of 15-20 miles, you arrive at a figure between three and a half, to five months' travel time (mean time 124.6 days). An ideal passage would take 120 days starting on or about 15 April with an arrival date of 15 August. Investigation has shown that the average rate of passage across the Great Platte River Road in Nebraska was about 24 days with an average march per day of 18 miles at a little over 2 miles per hour.<sup>26</sup>

Provisions and diet along the way, as shown in the previous list, were not of the highest quality in the days before much was known of good

nutrition and diet. Many emigrants did not know how to live off the land and therefore had to carry all their food with them. Before canning was well known, the only safe way to preserve foods was to dry it or smoke it. Therefore the diet concentrated on such items as chipped beef, jerky, bacon, beans, coffee, sugar, salt, hardtack, dried fish, dried fruits, rice, and tea. The typical menu for an emigrant might look something like this:

for breakfast, coffee, bacon, hardtack; for dinner, coffee, cold beans, bacon or buffalo; for supper, tea, boiled rice and dried beef or codfish.<sup>27</sup>

Heavy on monotony and short on nutrition, this type of diet was sure to bring on malnutrition and vitamin deficiency. The smart emigrant tried to supplement his diet with game, if he could shoot it, and such berries as he could find along the river banks. Very few references are found about eating fish from the Platte River, a valuable source of protein to the emigrant if he could catch any.<sup>28</sup> Many of the emigrants did carry whiskey in their cargo as either a medicinal aid or for trading. Others carried whiskey in the belief that adding it to the water would purify it; unfortunately it did not do so. The water that the emigrants used could not be described as bad; it was to be blunt, terrible. Water taken from the rivers, creeks, and waterholes of the trail was almost always foul and disease-ridden, and the provident boiled it before drinking. Those that did not boil their water contributed to a high mortality rate.

The myth of the American westward migration also has us believing that the emigrants suffered through numerous Indian attacks and great lawlessness while they plodded along their way west; Nothing could be further from the truth. Although the Indian threat will be discussed later on, let us consider what the hazards of the trail were in the years 1849-1853.

Perhaps the single most dangerous hazard awaiting the emigrant on the trail was disease. It has been estimated that perhaps 6%, or 1 of every 17, of those taking the Great Platte River Road died along the trail from one cause or another.<sup>29</sup> In order, the three most prevalent causes of death were disease, accidents, and then Indian attack coming in a very poor third.

An examination of the diseases common to the travelers of the prairie include the following: whooping cough, measles, mumps, smallpox, malaria, dysentery, delirium tremens, pneumonia, toothache, and cholera. It is the last named of these illnesses that was the great killer of the Plains. Asiatic cholera, a virulent plague, raged intermittently along the Great Platte River Road during the years 1849-1853, with the years 1850 and 1852 perhaps the worst years for this epidemic killer.<sup>30</sup> A waterborne virus, cholera affects both humans and some animals. Its initial symptoms include sore throat, vomiting, and diarrhea. Unknown today in the age of excellent sanitation, good hygiene, and clean water, none of these conditions existed along the trail in 1849-1853. The ecology of the Platte River prior to 1849 was such that it could support what few travelers and Indians that used it. After 1849 with thousands of people using the Platte as both water source and sewer, it is not surprising that some type of disease developed. Once the disease struck, the cholera victim developed a high fever, became delirious and then finally lapsed into a fatal coma.<sup>31</sup>

These were some of the observations of those present:

If I were going to cross again I would use the Platte water, for between these points the water was so warm and muddy... Between these points (Loup Fork and Fort Laramie) the trains suffered most from sickness and cholera.

I was talking to a muleteer that had come up the Platte when the emigration had nearly all passed. He said that from Loup Fork to Fort Laramie it would average six fresh graves to every mile. From other accounts I should think this estimate was none to great.<sup>32</sup>

The second greatest killer on the trail after disease was accidents. It is important to remember that in the days of poor personal hygiene and primitive medicine, even the smallest cut or broken bone could become fatal. Accidents along the trail were common; in fact the safety record of the Great Platte River Road was terrible. The vast majority of emigrants were strangers to large wagons, animals in large numbers, and especially firearms. The four biggest causes of accidental maimings and killings were: shooting, drowning, crushing under wagon wheels, and injuries resulting from handling domestic animals. There were many dangerous wild animals such as buffalo and rattlesnakes; however, if left alone they did not as a rule bother the emigrant.

The emigrants were heavily armed with rifles, shotguns, and pistols. These were to be used to hunt buffalo and defend themselves from Indians, but the emigrants frequently managed to wound or kill themselves instead. Firearms of the age were mostly percussion cap and ball or flintlock musket types of weapons with very few safety features on them. Joseph Rhodes, a California emigrant of 1850, recorded in his diary on 16 May 1850 the following:

To-day we drove 10 miles where we camped on Little Blue River.  
it is a bitiful stream. the grass is very short, dry and  
hot. one man accidentally shot him self through the head.  
he died instantly...<sup>33</sup>

One of the last causes of death one would expect on the Plains would be drowning, yet drownings were common along the river crossings of the Great Platte River Road. Fatigue, wagons and ferries turning over, and ignorance in the art of swimming resulted in many dying in the waters of the Kansas, Blue, Loup, and the Platte rivers. Some were killed or injured through careless accidents involving their wagons. Children were the

most likely victims to be crushed by wagon wheels or stampeding animals. But there were numerous adult casualties as well. Lorenzo Sawyer, an emigrant of 1850, writes on one unfortunate traveler:

About noon we found Dr. Clark... setting a fractured leg. The unfortunate man was from the western part of Wisconsin. In attempting to stop his oxen when frightened, he was run over and his leg severely fractured.<sup>34</sup>

As previously pointed out, the wild animals of the Platte were relatively harmless if left alone. The most dangerous animals were the domestic ones the emigrants brought with them. Mules kicked and fractured bones; stampeding horses and cattle also broke bones and caused many deaths, especially for those from urban areas with little experience in dealing with beasts of burden. Generally speaking, however, if you could swim, knew how to handle firearms and domestic animals, you had an excellent chance of survival - if the cholera did not kill you.

Indian conflict as noted was not a major cause of death to either the emigrant or the soldier during this time. George Webb, in his Chronological List of Engagements: Indian Wars, U.S.A., 1790-1898, lists only six engagements between 1849-1854. Only one of these engagements involved casualties greater than two people, the Grattan Massacre of August 19, 1854. Unruh, in his The Plains Across, gives an estimated count of emigrants killed by Indians, and Indians killed by emigrants in the years 1849-1853. By year here is his count:<sup>35</sup>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Emigrants killed</u>	<u>Indians killed</u>
1849	33	60
1850	48	76
1851	60	70
1852	45	70
1853	7	9



As can be seen the emigrants always managed to kill more Indians than the Indians killed emigrants. If we place these figures of emigrant deaths due to Indian attacks against Mattes's estimates of emigrant traffic, the statistics are rather revealing.<sup>36</sup>

<u>Year</u>	<u>Emigrant deaths</u>	<u>Estimated total traffic</u>	<u>% of deaths due to Indians</u>
1849	33	30,000	.001
1850	48	55,000	.0008
1851	60	10,000	.006
1852	45	50,000	.0009
1853	7	20,000	.0003

It is clear to see from these figures that the danger of being killed along the Great Platte River Road by savage Indians was greatly exaggerated. The danger in crossing the Plains was the danger of disease, accidents, or poor organization, not Indians. What then of those who were there to guard the emigrants from Indian attack, the U.S. Army? Let us now turn our attention to that small group of soldiers who set out to secure and defend the Nebraska frontier.

Endnotes, Chapter III, "Emigrants and the Nebraska Frontier, 1849-1853"

<sup>1</sup>Merrill J. Mattes, The Great Platte River Road (Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), p. 22. (Hereafter cited as Mattes, The Great Platte River Road).

<sup>2</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 22. See also John D. Unruh, Jr., The Plains Across (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 120. (Hereafter cited as Unruh, The Plains Across).

<sup>4</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup>U.S., Senate Exec. Doc. No. 96, 34th Cong., 1st sess., Vol. 18, 1856 (Serial 827) "Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States, 1839-1855" (Washington, D.C.: A. O. P. Nicholson, Printer, 1856), p. 79. (Hereafter cited as Senate, "Statistical Report").

<sup>6</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup>John M. Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 189. (Hereafter cited as Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail).

<sup>8</sup>Unruh, The Plains Across, p. 401.

<sup>9</sup>Unruh, The Plains Across, pp. 401-402.

<sup>10</sup>Edward McIlhenny, Recollections of a Forty-Niner (Kansas City, Missouri: Hailman Printing Co., 1908), p. 10. Goes into the cost of traveling in 1849, asserts that it could cost as much as \$300.00 a person to cross the Plains.

<sup>11</sup>Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, p. 189.

<sup>12</sup>Unruh, The Plains Across, p. 98.

<sup>13</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 105.

<sup>14</sup>George Winslow and Brackett Lord, "Letter of May 12, 1849 and June 17, 1849 from Fort Kearney" Collection of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Vol. XVII, (1913): 121. (Hereafter cited as Winslow, "Letter of May 12, 1849...").

<sup>15</sup>See also John H. Benson, "From St. Joseph to Sacramento by a Forty-Niner" 1849 (Typewritten), p. 11. This unpublished manuscript can be found in the collection of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

- <sup>16</sup>Winslow, "Letter of May 12, 1849...", p. 121.
- <sup>17</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, pp. 39-40.
- <sup>18</sup>Faragher, Women and Men on the Overland Trail, p. 192.
- <sup>19</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 43.
- <sup>20</sup>Faragher Women and Men on the Overland Trail, pp. 192-193.
- <sup>21</sup>John H. Benson, "From St. Joseph to Sacramento by a Forty-Niner" 1849 (Typewritten), p. 17. This unpublished manuscript can be found in the Collection of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.
- <sup>22</sup>Walter Everett and George B. Strother, ed. "The Gold Rush Diary of Henry Tappan." Annals of Wyoming, Vol. XXV, (July, 1953): 122.
- <sup>23</sup>Merrill J. Mattes, ed. "Joseph Rhodes and the California Gold Rush of 1840." Annals of Wyoming, Vol. XXIII, (Jan. 1951): 65. (Hereafter cited as Mattes, ed. "Joseph Rhodes").
- <sup>24</sup>John Steele, Across the Plains, Joseph Schaffer, ed. (Chicago: The Caxton Club, 1930), p. 35.
- <sup>25</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 37.
- <sup>26</sup>John Wood in his Journal (Columbus, Ohio: Nevins and Myers, 1871) speaks of crossing Nebraska in fifty-seven days, 26 April-22 June 1850. On the other hand in the "Diary of Orange Gaylord to California and Oregon in 1850" in the Transactions of the Oregon Pioneer Association, Vol. 42-54, 1914, they speak of a nineteen day passage, 15 May - 3 June, 1850.
- <sup>27</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 48.
- <sup>28</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 49.
- <sup>29</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 82.
- <sup>30</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 83.
- <sup>31</sup>William H. McNeill, Plagues and Peoples (New York: Doubleday Co., 1976), p. 261. See also U.S., Senate, "Statistical Report", p. 79
- <sup>32</sup>S. V. Miller, "Copy of a letter written by S. V. Miller to his parents from Salem, Oregon, November 24, 1852." Wyoming Historical Society Association, (1919): 33.
- <sup>33</sup>Mattes, ed. "Joseph Rhodes", p. 63.
- <sup>34</sup>Lorenzo Sawyer, Way Sketches (New York: Publisher unknown, 1926), p. 28.
- <sup>35</sup>Unruh. The Plains Across. p. 185.

<sup>36</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 23.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE U.S. ARMY

1849-1853

#### A Status Report

In 1849, following the end of the Mexican War, a reorganized U.S. Army started to garrison the newly acquired territories. To assist in the administration of these new lands, the Army divided the nation into several military geographic divisions; each division was further divided into departments. In total there were eleven departments making up three divisions.

The Eastern Division consisted of Departments One through Four, these areas were garrisoned by the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Regiments of Artillery, and the 4th Regiment of Infantry. The area controlled by the Eastern Division included the New England states, the Ohio River valley, the states of Michigan, Wisconsin, Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida.

The Western Division consisted of Departments Five through Nine. This division was garrisoned by the 4th Regiment of Artillery, 1st, 3rd, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th Regiments of Infantry. Also present were detachments of the 1st and 2nd Regiments of Dragoons and the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen. The Western Division covered all of the United States west of the Mississippi River with the exception of the present day states of California, Washington, and Oregon. Those three states were the responsibility of the Pacific

Divison consisting of Departments Ten and Eleven, garrisoned by the 2nd Regiment of Infantry, the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen, and detachments from the 1st and 3rd Regiments of Artillery.<sup>1</sup>

In all there was a total of 9,311 soldiers to guard the United States from any trouble, foreign or domestic, that could occur within its borders. This Army of some nine thousand was categorized by military speciality. The Corps of Troops was comprised of the troops of the Line: Infantry, Dragoons (soon to be called the Cavalry), and Artillery; and the troops of the Staff: Engineers, Ordinance, Medical, Pay, and Quartermaster. In 1849 the largest tactical unit was the regiment with each regiment consisting of a number of companies. The regiments of the Army in 1849 were as follows:<sup>2</sup>

Dragoons: Two regiments - 1st and 2nd Dragoons

Mounted Riflemen: One regiment

Artillery: Four regiments - 1st through the 4th Artillery

Infantry: Eight regiments - 1st through the 8th Infantry.

Dragoons or cavalry, and infantry regiments were organized with ten companies each. Artillery regiments had twelve companies or batteries, but due to budgetary restraints ten of these companies were minus artillery and were infantry in all but name. Mounted riflemen were organized into ten large companies possessing a greater degree of mobility than normal infantry units. In reality they were a light cavalry force that eventually became the 3rd Regiment of Cavalry in the mid 1850's. Peacetime tables of organization allotted each dragoon company fifty privates, infantry companies forty-two privates, artillery companies forty-two privates if heavy artillery, sixty-four if light artillery, and mounted riflemen had sixty-four privates

in each company.<sup>3</sup> By 1850 these figures changed with each company of the Western and Pacific Divisions being authorized seventy-four privates regardless of the type of unit.<sup>4</sup> Each company was commanded by a captain, assisted by a first and second lieutenant, and a small staff of non-commissioned officers, the sergeants and corporals. Each regiment was commanded by a colonel assisted by a lieutenant-colonel, two majors, an adjutant, a quartermaster, and a non-commissioned officer group under a sergeant-major. Each regiment also had musicians: buglers for the dragoons and a band for the infantry and artillery. The authorized aggregate strength of these regiments was as follows:

Dragoons: 652

Mounted Riflemen: 802

Artillery: 748

Infantry: 559,

After 1850 any regiment in the Western or Pacific divisions theoretically could number nearly 900 men. In reality the figures were closer to one or two officers and thirty to forty men per company, or 300 to 400 men per regiment. Spread thinly over the frontier, companies operated by themselves. Rarely were they brought together as regiments. Companies therefore became the basic tactical unit of employment.<sup>5</sup> As previously mentioned, the present for duty strength of these units seldom matched the authorized strength. Looking at the authorized versus the present for duty strength for 1849 to 1853, we see the following data:<sup>6</sup>

Table 2

Authorized vs Present for Duty Strength, U.S. Army, 1849-1853

<u>Year</u>	<u>Authorized</u> Officer/enlisted = Total	<u>Present for Duty</u> Officer/enlisted = Total
1849	870/8940=9810	766/8545=9311
1850	889/12,038=12,927	708/9201=9909
1851	896/9233=10,129	745/8574=9319
1852	959/9284=10,243	632/8722=9354
1853	962/9377=10,339	640/8168=8808

(See also Graph 2, Authorized vs Present for Duty Strength, U.S. Army, 1849-1853)

As seen the present for duty strength never equalled the authorized strength in the years 1849-1853. The present for duty, or on hand strength ran anywhere from 77% of authorized in 1850 to 95% in 1849. The difference can be attributed to changes in authorized personnel strength, the California gold strikes, and an improving economy. Economy, however, was the watchword of the Congress, a Congress, especially Southern Congressmen, that did not want a large standing Army. The drop in officer strength is directly linked to the improving economy. With 73% of the total officer corps West Point trained, their engineering skills were in great demand in the civilian sector.<sup>7</sup> Why stay in the Army at \$25.00 a month, second lieutenants' pay, when one could make much more in better surroundings? Due to these reasons — changes in strength, California gold, and a booming economy — there was a shortage of troops, throughout the U.S. Army.

This shortage of troops combined with annual losses due to discharges from expiration of service, disabilities, deaths and desertions, caused a turnover rate of more than 33% per year. In simpler terms, more than a third of the Army had to be replaced every year from 1849 to 1853.<sup>8</sup>



This meant that a large portion of the Army was constantly recruiting and training new soldiers. Lack of time and troops forced the Army into sending out recruits that were only partially trained; the rest of their training was accomplished on the job.

These recruits reported to companies scattered over the Continental United States, 80% of which were west of the Mississippi River. For example, Military Department Six was part of the Western Division in 1849, and consisted of seven posts with 798 officers and men. The department headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri was commanded by Brevet Brigadier General N. S. Clarke. The posts were as shown:<sup>9</sup>

Table 3

U.S. Army, Western Division, Military Department Six

<u>Posts</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Garrison</u>
Fort Gaines	Minnesota Territory	95 men
Fort Snelling	Minnesota Territory (near St. Paul, Minnesota)	172 men
Fort Laramie	Oregon Route (present day Wyoming)	163 men
Fort Kearny	Oregon Route	141 men
Fort Leavenworth	Near Westport, Missouri (present day Kansas)	82 men
Fort Scott	Marmiton, Missouri	74 men
Jefferson Barracks	Near St. Louis, Missouri	69 men

(Figures given are present for duty strength)

By 1853 the situation had changed in Military Department Number Six. Two posts, Fort Gaines and Scott, were abandoned and three new posts were added: Fort Ripley, located in the Minnesota Territory; Fort Ridgely, Minnesota Territory; and Fort Riley, Nebraska Territory. To garrison these new posts the unit strength of the Department did rise from 798 to 988 officers

and men.<sup>10</sup> By any standard 988 men were too few to cover an area that extended south from Canada to the state of Missouri and was bounded on the east and west by the Missouri River and the state of Wyoming, respectively. Economy was the limiting factor, and the need for troops everywhere was great.

What of those who went out to defend the far frontier? The enlisted and commissioned members of the Army of the United States in 1849-1853? The enlisted recruit of the day was characterized in an official survey of recruiting operations as:

not of the most desirable character, consisting principally of newly arrived immigrants, of those broken down by bad habits and dissipation, the idle, and the improvident.<sup>11</sup>

Native born Americans with farming backgrounds were the preferred recruits, but fewer than 13% of the recruits fell into this category. More than 50% of the recruits were recent emigrants. Almost 50% of the emigrant recruits were Irish and 20% of them were German. With rare exception these recruits were ignorant of military life, in most cases illiterate and in some instances unable to speak English. A man's moral character, past legal problems, or physical size was no barrier to enlistment. As one trooper, Sergeant Percival G. Lowe of the 1st Dragoons, said of his enlistment:

Family trouble, disappointed in love, riots and personal difficulties, making one amenable to the law, often caused men to enlist who proved to be the best of soldiers. In my troop there were men isolating themselves from society for all sorts of reasons. A man drunk would not be enlisted; but... if he were sober at the time of presenting himself, and physically able he would pass... Endurance was the test; all else was waived.<sup>12</sup>

Once enlisted, the new recruit was sent to one of three schools of instruction located in the Eastern Division. Infantry recruits went to

Fort Columbus in New York Harbor, cavalry/dragoon recruits went to Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, and artillery recruits went to Newport Barracks, Kentucky.<sup>13</sup> While at these schools the new recruits were trained in elements of marching, firearms, and at Carlisle Barracks, horsemanship. Sergeant Lowe, of the 1st Dragoons, speaks of days filled with activity, "Carbine and saber drill come in the forenoon, on foot, and mounted drill in the afternoon... good horses to ride."<sup>14</sup> All too often those days came to a quick end as incessant calls for reinforcements forced the Army into sending out these recruits inadequately trained. The result was that these replacements quite often needed training when they got to their destination. Recruits went out ignorant of their own weapons and unable to stay in the saddle. This situation, once they arrived at their destination, was rarely remedied, as the shortage of officers and non-commissioned officers meant that units were unable to train their own people.<sup>15</sup>

These men signed on for a minimum five year enlistment and an initial pay of \$7.00 a month in the infantry and artillery, \$8.00 a month in the cavalry. If a soldier was promoted to sergeant within his five year stint, he would then receive \$13.00 a month. Pay was by regulation to be reimbursed every two months, but it was not uncommon for some remote garrisons to be without their pay for six or more months. In addition to his pay, the enlisted soldier also received his uniforms, rations, and quarters.<sup>16</sup> The daily ration, especially on the frontier, was monotonous and vitamin deficient. Day in and day out the foods placed before the soldier consisted of fresh or salt beef or pork, hard bread, dried beans, peas or rice, and coffee. Game or fish did supplement the fare in frontier posts, but fresh vegetables and fruits were a priceless rarity.<sup>17</sup> In General Order Number One of 1851,

Secretary of War C. M. Conrad ordered all frontier post commanders to grow their own vegetable gardens. This experiment failed at almost every post due to "the constant activity in which it has been found necessary to keep the troops, and to the necessity of employing them in the construction of barracks and in other works."<sup>18</sup> Desiccated vegetables and dried meat "biscuit" were also experimented with during this period, but they were a dismal failure.<sup>19</sup>

The character of the recruit, the monotony of garrison life, and the absence of entertaining things to do with what little leisure time was available, brought on the evils of alcoholism and desertion. Sergeant Lowe estimates that at any one time 10% of his unit was "undergoing punishment in the guard house... nearly all of the offenses growing out of drinking whiskey."<sup>20</sup> Despite heroic efforts by some officers to keep alcohol out of the hands of the troops, there was always some establishment where whiskey could be purchased.<sup>21</sup> Low pay, terrible food, and poor living conditions produced a yearly desertion rate of 15% in 1853. The rate was even higher in 1849 and 1850 after the discovery of gold in California.<sup>22</sup> The lure of instant wealth was too much for some troops of the western frontier. For those few that were caught by the Army after they deserted, the penalties were very harsh. The Articles of War prescribed the death penalty for the crime of desertion. During peacetime this punishment was rare; in most cases a convicted deserter was brought before his company in a formal ceremony and flogged with a rawhide whip with up to fifty lashes. After the flogging, the deserter's head was shaved, his hip branded with a large D, and then he was drummed off the post to the strains of the "Rogue's March." The Articles of War covered every imaginable offense. Except for major crimes such

as desertion, rape and murder, punishments were left to the discretion of the officers of the courts-martial. These punishments could include flogging, confinement with a ball and chain, use of an iron spiked collar, being hung by the thumbs or wrists, reduction in rank, forfeiture of pay, or any other torture conceived of by man. Courts-martial members were officers, because enlisted men were not allowed to sit on courts-martial boards. This caused many officers to become occupied for long periods of time as members of courts-martial. It further insured long delays for courts-martial proceedings at those posts with only a few officers to perform the duty. Not until after the Civil War was this cumbersome system changed.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast to the enlisted men were the officers of the U.S. Army, a group characterized by disparities of competence and incompetence, youth and old age, vigor and debility. At the bottom were the ambitious, young line officers fresh from the triumphant battlefields of Mexico. From their ranks would come the future commanders of the Civil War. Men such as Ord, Grant, Ewell, Sheridan, Hood, and Lee all received training in the Frontier Army of the 1840's and 1850's. In the upper echelons of the military, on the other hand, there were those who had been robbed of their abilities by the passage of time. It was not uncommon for some commanders in the rank of major or above to have been in service since the War of 1812. Major General Winfield Scott, the Commanding General of the U.S. Army, had been serving since 1808. Major John S. Simonsen of the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen had been in the Army since 1814. Many of the older officers lacked both the ability and the desire to keep up with their younger troops in field campaigns.<sup>24</sup>

By the 1850's, 73% of the Army officers had been trained at the

United States Military Academy.<sup>25</sup> Cadets were trained as engineers and infused with a spirit of military professionalism. Training at the Academy did not, however, include frontier tactics. Professor Dennis Hart Mahan of the West Point faculty taught cadets the theories and the strategies of Tacitus and Napoleon, not how to deploy an infantry skirmish line against a hostile Indian force.<sup>26</sup> Those things that allowed one to survive in combat were learned through first hand experience. Many officers had their first "baptism of fire" during the Mexican War. Grant, Thomas, Reynolds, Hancock, Lee, McClellan, McDowell, Meade, Beauregard, Hooker, J. E. Johnston, Longstreet, and Jackson all learned their trade during the Mexican War.<sup>27</sup> In spite of the ignorance and neglect of some of the older and more senior officers in command, junior officers such as those previously mentioned saved many lives in the battles of the Mexican War. One other outgrowth of the Mexican War were the use of temporary, or brevet, officer ranks that was to plague the Army for years afterward. To avoid confusion this text will use both ranks when and where needed.<sup>28</sup>

Once the Mexican War was over, the U.S. Army and its officers went forth to guard and garrison the frontier. Leaving the glory of war behind, these officers faced a new series of challenges. Many did not accept these challenges and left the Army. They left disappointed in the low pay, lack of advancement, and poor family life. The pay scales for officers in the 1850's ranged from \$25.00 a month for a second lieutenant to \$75.00 a month for a colonel. Allowances for rations, fuel, forage, servants, and quarters did add considerably to the base pay, but the total was far less than salaries in comparable civilian occupations. In 1850, Congress, realizing the high cost of living on the frontier, granted an additional \$2.00 a day to officers

stationed in California, Washington, and Oregon. Even when this pay raise was extended to the Western Division, it still did not sufficiently compensate the officers. Promotion in the 1850's was not merely slow; it would be more accurate to call it sluggish.<sup>29</sup> Consider, for example, the record of Daniel P. Woodbury, the construction engineer of Fort Kearney, Nebraska. Woodbury was sixth in his class at West Point. Commissioned a Brevet Second Lieutenant on July 1, 1832, he advanced to the rank of Second Lieutenant on July 1, 1836. On July 1, 1838, he was promoted to First Lieutenant and then Captain on March 3, 1853. Were it not for the Civil War, Woodbury might have advanced to the rank of Major sometime before his death. As it was, he made Major General before he was killed in action in August, 1864.<sup>30</sup> Slow promotion was due to governmental economics and, perhaps the most important factor, the lack of a retirement system for the officer corps. In 1850, Secretary of War, C. M. Conrad, spoke of the need for a retirement system for Army officers in his Annual Report of that year:

There are many officers, who in consequence of their advanced age, of wounds, or of disease connected in the service, are entirely disabled, but who, nevertheless receive full pay. It would be more in accordance with justice, and no doubt with the feelings of the officers themselves, that they should receive less pay and be legally exempted from duty.<sup>31</sup>

The lack of a retirement system had two consequences. First, as previously noted, it saddled the command structure with older, wornout men unable to perform their duties. Second, the chances of promotion were blocked until someone died; then and only then could one expect promotion.<sup>32</sup> Woodbury's case as a lieutenant for twenty-one years is not uncommon. Lack of promotion also meant lack of any pay raises, so for those with families it was a hardship. This hardship was compounded by the poor family life

that was a by-product of the military in those days. For an officer to take his family with him to the frontier meant exposing his wife and children to the same risks he took in combat. This would include living in an adobe or sod structure surrounded by a hostile environment, exposed to Indians, sickness, bad food, and miles from civilization. Yet if you left your family behind you might not see them for years. For example, Captain Ulysses S. Grant was transferred to California, July 1851, leaving his family in Missouri. Grant did not return to them until the summer of 1854.<sup>33</sup>

The result of low pay, slow promotion, and a poor family life was a low retention rate for officers. The enlisted men deserted while the officers resigned. When Grant came home to his family in 1854 it was as Mr. Grant, not Captain Grant. In 1847 of the 1,330 West Point graduates still living, only 597 of them were on active duty. This represents a retention rate for officers of only 39%. A study of the statistics of the Secretary of War's Annual Reports from 1849 to 1853 shows a declining rate of officer retention from 86% of authorized strength in 1849, to 66% of authorized strength in 1853.<sup>34</sup> Remember also that West Point graduates were college trained engineers in a time when the civilian employment market had a great need for engineers.


In conclusion, the U.S. Army of 1849-1853 was an organization with a great deal of potential, but not much strength. Scattered over the western frontier, the Army did not have the power to maintain peace anywhere. At best all that could be maintained was an uneasy standoff between the Indians, the Army, and the emigrants. As long as the Army was constricted



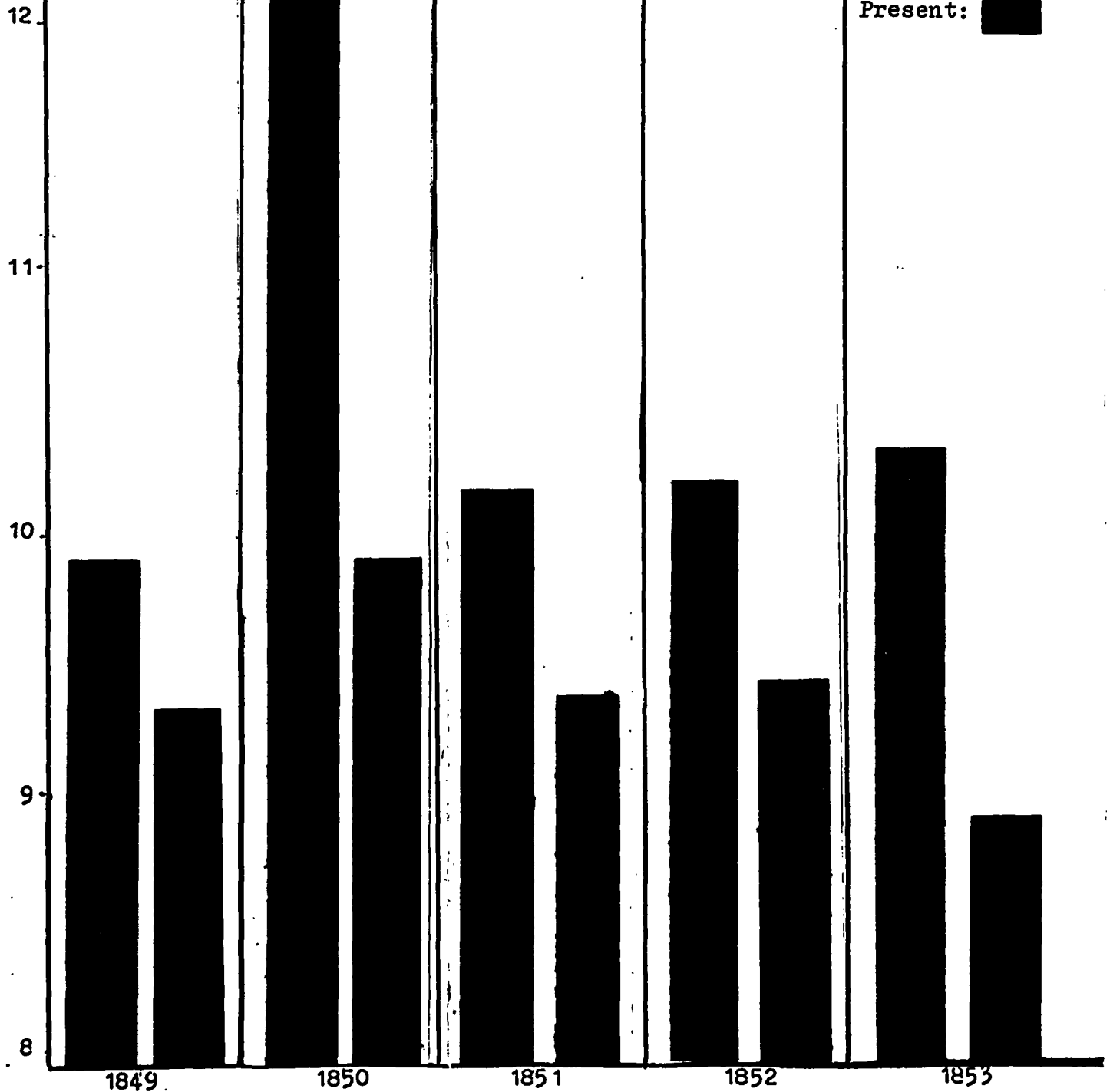
by a frugal government, the situation of too little, spread over too large an area would continue to exist. The weaknesses of the U.S. Army could be listed as a lack of manpower, an overaged command structure, and a lack of frontier experience. The strengths of the U.S. Army lay in its firepower, excellent junior leadership, and the ability to accomplish a great deal with few available resources.<sup>35</sup> This is the Army that would win the Civil War and conquer the western frontier. The period of 1849-1853 can be called its infancy.

Troops  
in  
1000s

Graph 2: Authorized  
v Present for Duty  
Strength, U.S. Army  
1849-1853.

Authorized: 

Present: 



Endnotes, Chapter IV, "The U.S. Army, 1849-1853"

<sup>1</sup>U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1849 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1849), pp. 181-183. (Hereafter cited as War, Annual Report, 1849).

<sup>2</sup>War, Annual Report, 1849, p. 188a.

<sup>3</sup>Robert M. Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), p. 22. (Hereafter cited as Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue). See also U.S. Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1856 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1856), pp. 230-231.

<sup>4</sup>U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1850 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1850), p. 3. (Hereafter cited as War, Annual Report, 1850).

<sup>5</sup>Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, pp. 22-23.

<sup>6</sup>War, Annual Report, 1849, pp. 188a-188b. See also War, Annual Report, 1850, pp. 116a-116b; U.S. Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1851 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1851), pp. 166-175. (Hereafter cited as War, Annual Report, 1851); U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1852, pp. 46-49. (Hereafter cited as War, Annual Report, 1852); U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1853 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1853), pp. 100-109. (Hereafter cited as War, Annual Report, 1853).

<sup>7</sup>Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, p. 33. See also, William Lerner, compiler. Historical Statistics of the United States, 2 Vols. 1:78. The average monthly wage for a civil engineer in the United States in 1850 was approximately \$40-\$45.00.

<sup>8</sup>War, Annual Report, 1853, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup>War, Annual Report, 1849, p. 188d.

<sup>10</sup>War, Annual Report, 1853, pp. 116-117.

<sup>11</sup>U.S., Senate Exec. Doc. No. 96, 34th Cong., 1st sess. Vol. 18, 1856 (Serial 827) "Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in A. O. P. Nicholson, Printer, 1856), pp. 625-632.

<sup>12</sup>Percival G. Lowe, Five Years a Dragoon, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), p. 5. (Hereafter cited as Lowe, Five Years a Dragoon).

<sup>13</sup>War, Annual Report, 1849, p. 186.

<sup>14</sup>Lowe, Five Years a Dragoon, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup>Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup>Randy Steffen, The Horse Soldiers, 1776-1943, 4 Vols. (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 2:6. (Hereafter cited as Steffen The Horse Soldiers). See also Eugene Bandel, Frontier Life in the Army, (Glendale, California: A. H. Clark Co., 1932), p. 124. Uniforms for the men of the U.S. Army were undergoing a radical change in the 1850's. With the publication of General Order Number 31, of 1851, a new uniform code was promulgated for the dress of the U.S. Army. For formal occasions officers and men wore dark blue frock coats and light blue trousers. Rank was worn on the coats and consisted of shoulder straps for the officers and chevrons for the enlisted men. This outfit was worn with a black leather belt and topped by a high pillbox visored cap. On less formal occasions, whenever the unit went to the field, for example, uniform regulations were less strictly observed. One soldier of the 1850's, Sergeant Eugene Bandel, of the 6th Infantry, wrote to his parents in Prussia with the following observations about his "Prairie outfit":

You should see us here in our prairie outfits: don't imagine a uniform, Every man is wearing a broadbrimmed hat, each of a different color; white trousers of rough material; a woolen shirt of red, gree, blue, or brown - in short, of any and every color, usually open in front and worn like a coat; the shoes... with the uppers slashed wherever they might chafe in marching... there is no distinction between officer and private.

The formal uniform with minor changes was also to be used as a fatigue uniform. However, in these cases most of the soldiers preferred function and comfort rather than spit and polish.

<sup>17</sup>Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, p. 36.

<sup>18</sup>War, Annual Report, 1851, p. 111. See also War, Annual Report, 1852, p. 4

<sup>19</sup>War, Annual Report, 1851, p. 336.

<sup>20</sup>Lowe, Five Years a Dragoon, p. 97.

<sup>21</sup>Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, p. 40.

<sup>22</sup>War, Annual Report, 1853, p. 8. See also Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, p. 40.

<sup>23</sup>Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup>U.S., Department of War, Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States, 1789-1903. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), pp. 870 and 888. (Hereafter cited as War, Historical Register). See also Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, pp. 30-31.

<sup>25</sup>Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup>Russell F. Weigley, History of the United States Army. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1967), pp. 150-151. (Hereafter cited as Weigley, History of the U.S. Army). See also Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant, 2 Vols. (New York: The Century Co., 1903), 1:19-22. (Hereafter cited as Grant, Memoirs).

<sup>27</sup>William A. Ganoe, The History of the United States Army (New York-London: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1942), p. 197.

<sup>28</sup>Lowe, Five Years a Dragoon, pp. XVI-XXIII. Brevet rank can be defined in several ways. The most common definition is a commission that entitles an officer to rank above his pay grade. Other definitions call brevet rank an honorary or temporary commission. A more technical definition is a "commission conferring upon an officer a grade in the Army additional to and higher than that which he holds by virtue of his commission in a particular corps of a legally established military organization." Congress started awarding brevet ranks as an award of merit in July, 1812. In the days prior to the awards of medals and decorations this was one of the few means available to recognize heroism or meritorious service. During the Mexican War it was customary to award a brevet rank to every officer took part in a battle. Each brevet was of a higher rank than normally held, so that an officer's brevet rank might be two or three grades higher than his Regular Army rank. In the 1850's it was not uncommon to have lieutenants who held brevet ranks as majors. These brevet ranks were to be used while on courts-martials, when commanding units of the various corps (infantry, cavalry, artillery) and at various others times. Officers were addressed by their brevet rank, or their Regular Army rank, dependent on the circumstances. The consequences of brevet rank were chaotic and comic; Who, for example, had the higher rank, a second lieutenant with a brevet as major, or a first lieutenant with a brevet as a captain?

<sup>29</sup>Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, p. 33.

<sup>30</sup>War, Historical Register, p. 1056.

<sup>31</sup>War, Annual Report, 1850, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup>Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue, p. 32.

<sup>33</sup>Grant, Memoirs, 1:167.

<sup>34</sup>Weigley, History of the U.S. Army, p. 169.

<sup>35</sup>Robert M. Reilly, United States Military Small Arms, 1816-1865. (Chicago: Eagle Press, Inc., 1970), pp. 14-15, 33, 115, 181, 197, 202-203. See also Steffen, The Horse Soldiers, 1:204-205, 2:25. With economy as a watchword for those on the frontier, the arms and equipment they possessed were functional, but not extravagant. Officers were armed with sabers, pistols, and revolvers during this age of conversion from flintlock to percussion weapons. Most officers were armed with the U.S. Percussion Pistol, Model 1842, a smoothbore pistol that weighed two pounds, twelve ounces. It fired a caliber .54 ball and had an overall length of fourteen inches. Produced from 1841 to 1852 this weapon was in use through the early years of the Civil War. There were some officers, especially the dragoons and the mounted riflemen, who were armed with the earliest versions of the Colt revolvers. Two versions, the Model 1847 Army Revolver and the Model 1848 Percussion Army Revolver 3d Model, were the most numerous. The Colt Model 1847 was a caliber .44, rifled and single action. It was fifteen and a half inches in length and was four pounds, nine ounces. The Colt Model 1848 Percussion Army Revolver 3d Model was a caliber .44, rifled and single action weapon. Shorter than the Model 1847, the Model 1848 was only fourteen inches long and four pounds and two ounces. The Model 1848 also came equipped with a detachable stock enabling it to be used as a pistol-carbine. Both revolvers were immensely popular in an Army that preferred firing six shots rather than one before reloading. Many officers purchased their own revolvers for their personal use.

Dragoon troopers were armed with the U.S. Cavalry Musketoon Model 1847, a caliber .69, smoothbore weapon. An abbreviated musket, the Musketoon was forty-one inches in length and weighed seven pounds and four ounces. This weapon was produced from 1847 to 1859 and was not popular with the troops using it. The Musketoon was hard to load on the run, it lacked sufficient range, and it gave a rather hard kick when fired. The only attractive feature of this weapon was that it was easy to carry for the horse bound dragoon. The Regiment of Mounted Riflemen carried the "Mississippi Rifle." This nickname was gained by the rifle during the Mexican War when this weapon was successfully used by the First Mississippi Volunteer Infantry Regiment commanded by Colonel Jefferson Davis. The U.S. Percussion Rifle, Model 1841, or "Mississippi Rifle," was a caliber .54 rifle that was nine pounds, twelve ounces with an overall length of forty-eight and a half inches. Well liked for its accuracy, its length did not make it easy to carry on a horse. Infantry soldiers still carried muskets, and U.S. Percussion Musket, Model 1842. This weapon was a caliber .69 smoothbore musket that was nine pounds, three ounces with an overall length of fifty-seven and thirteen-sixteenth inches. Produced from 1842 to 1855, it was replaced by the Model 1855 rifled musket. Although swords and sabers were issued to the officers and non-commissioned officers of the Army, their use was more ceremonial than functional. Sabre charging troopers were rarely found outside of Remington prints. Most units left their sabers behind when they went to the field.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ARMY AND THE NEBRASKA FRONTIER

In the opening of the American frontier the first trail blazers were usually fur trappers and commercial traders. These early explorers were followed by the military, who conducted a more scientific exploration of the land than that done by the fur trapper. The early days of the Nebraska Territory were no different in this respect. One of the first explorers along the Great Platte River Road, were a six man group from the American Fur Company in Astoria, Oregon. Under the leadership of Robert Stuart, this party of men passed along the Great Platte River Road in the spring of 1813.<sup>1</sup> Military expeditions during the early 1800's included such names as Lewis and Clark, Long, Bonneville, Pike, and most important for our purposes, Captain John C. Fremont. Fremont's expedition of 1842 provided one of the first good maps of the Great Platte River Road in Nebraska.<sup>2</sup> However, the first military presence in Nebraska was not along the Great Platte River Road, it was along the Missouri River.

The winter quarters of the Yellowstone Expedition of 1819 was established on the low ground along the Missouri River north of present day Council Bluffs, Iowa. The camp was washed away by a flood the following year, and Fort Atkinson, was established along the bluffs on the west side of the Missouri River. Fort Atkinson was in existence from 1819 to 1827 and was the first military post of any significance in Nebraska. Yet it was

too far from the settlements to provide any type of meaningful protection. With the path of westward movement going overland rather than northwest via the Missouri River, Fort Atkinson was off the traveled path. A new post closer to white settlements and frontier trails was established at Fort Leavenworth. In existence since 1827 as a military post, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, was an ideal location to provide escorts for Santa Fe Trail caravans and act as an advanced depot for military and civil expeditions. Westward beyond Fort Leavenworth there was no U.S. military force present until after the Mexican War. After the end of the Mexican War, the nation stretched continuously from coast to coast. The need for protection for westward emigrants became a prime mission of the U.S. Army. The first attempt to provide this protection occurred right before the Mexican War. On March 6, 1846, Major General Winfield Scott, the Commanding General of the U.S. Army, ordered Colonel Stephen Kearny of the First Dragoons, to establish a post in Nebraska. Special Order Number 17 of 1846, from Scott to Kearny specified "a new military post will be established on the Missouri River, near the mouth of Table Creek, as soon as the season for operations will permit. The site will be selected by Colonel Kearny of the First Dragoons."<sup>3</sup> By May 12, 1846 the first detachment of troops were leaving Fort Leavenworth to start construction of what was to become the first Fort Kearny. Two companies of troops, one infantry, one dragoon, were engaged in building Fort Kearny by May 22, 1846.<sup>4</sup> A month later all construction at the fort ceased as Kearny and his troops were recalled to Fort Leavenworth to engage in the Mexican War.<sup>5</sup> All Regular Army troops were being sent south and west to fight the Mexicans. To fill the void on the frontier, the Federal Government had to levy the states for additional



troops. On June 1, 1847, Secretary of War William Marcy sent a letter to the Adjutant General of the Army, Roger Jones, stating:

a requisition has been made upon the State of Missouri for one battalion (five companies) of Mounted Volunteers, to be employed in establishing the military stations... on the line of communication with Oregon. These stations for the present will be limited to two, the first near the Grand Island where the road to California encounters the Platte River, and the second at or near Fort Laramie.<sup>6</sup>

With these words Fort Kearny on the Missouri River was to be abandoned and the site for a new post was chosen. The Regiment of Missouri Mounted Volunteers set out from Fort Leavenworth on September 5, 1847. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ludmill E. Powell, the Missouri Mounted Volunteers consisted of fourteen officers and 464 men. Arriving at Fort Kearny on September 15, 1847, the Missouri Mounted Volunteers spent the winter at this post preparing to move to Grand Island in the spring.<sup>7</sup> One week after the arrival of Lieutenant Colonel Powell and his troops at Fort Kearny, First Lieutenant Daniel P. Woodbury, Corps of Engineers, left with a party of five officers and seventy-five men to survey the proposed site of a new Fort Kearney. First Lieutenant Woodbury's party stayed at the Grand Island of the Platte for a short time and then returned to old Fort Kearny on October 23, 1847.<sup>8</sup> On April 28, 1848, the Missouri Mounted Volunteers left the old fort and proceeded to the site of the new Fort Kearny. In a report to the Chief of Engineers dated November 10, 1847, First Lieutenant Woodbury writes about the location of this new post in the following words:

The site may be assumed as level. It rises, however gently to the south and the ground continues rising nearly to the bluffs distant two miles. The site is never overflowed: its plain is about 10 feet above the river low water and at that depth, water at any desired quantity can be obtained.

The trees... are cottonwood, scrub elm, small willows, and scattering ash and a very few cedars. The cotton wood is the only tree that grows in any abundance... the soil is sandy.

There is every reason to believe that the station in question will add much to the security of the Oregon road, and gradually overcome the audacity of the Indians -- Pawnee and Sioux -- mostly Pawnee -- who now infest it.<sup>9</sup>

As seen in this report, First Lieutenant Woodbury was looking at two things in the selection of the site of Fort Kearny: availability of building materials (lumber) and proximity to the emigrant trail. On June 1 and 2, 1848, the Missouri Mounted Volunteers arrived at the site of what was to become Fort Kearny. Twenty-three officers and 448 men started construction of the post on June 3, 1848. The new post was first called Fort Childs after First Lieutenant Woodbury's father-in-law, Brevet Brigadier General Thomas Childs, a hero of the Seminole War. The name of Fort Childs was never officially sanctioned by the War Department.<sup>10</sup> Not until General Order 66 of December 30, 1848, did the post receive its name, Fort Kearny, after the late Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny, who had died that year.<sup>11</sup> Construction first started on a sod stable and barracks for the officers, unfortunately, progress on these structures was delayed by heavy rains. Progress was even slower after July, 1848, when news of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the war with Mexico, reached the Missouri troops. Only one four room officer's quarters was finished by the end of October, 1848.<sup>12</sup> On October 28, 1848, the Missouri Mounted Volunteers were relieved of their duties at Fort Kearny and replaced by Regular Army troops from the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen.

The Regiment of Mounted Riflemen was an unusual force for the Army in its day. Not truly infantry, and not cavalry, the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen was a combination of both. As a mobile infantry force the Regiment was ideal for duty on the frontier against a mobile enemy, the Indians. Initially organized in 1846 for duty along the western frontier,

the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen was instead thrown into the combat of the Mexican War.<sup>13</sup> By 1848, with the war over, the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen was at last getting back to its original purpose, the defense of the western frontier. The first Regular Army troops stationed at Fort Kearny were under the command of Captain (Brevet Major) Charles F. Ruff. The units available to Captain Ruff were Companies I and G of the Regiment of Mounted Riflemen.<sup>14</sup> Captain Ruff graduated from West Point on September 1, 1834 near the bottom of his class. Serving some thirty years, Ruff retired from the Army on March 30, 1864, as a Brigadier General.<sup>15</sup> When he took over Fort Kearny on October 28, 1848, it was in the hope that he would be taking charge of a completed post. What Captain Ruff found was one four room officer's quarters and a caretaker force of one lieutenant and eighteen privates from the Missouri Mounted Volunteers.<sup>16</sup> Captain Ruff's first Post Return for the month of October 1848, shows 118 officers and men present for duty, but fails to mention that his wife Annie, and daughter Margaret were also present.<sup>17</sup> The combined total of 120 men, women, and children spent a miserable winter constructing Fort Kearny. On October 31, 1848, Captain Ruff wrote to Adjutant General Roger Jones reporting that

Our situation at this post will be for this winter one of extreme hardship and I fear much suffering, we have our shelters yet to erect both for men and horses and the weather is already exceedingly cold, has every indication of a heavy snow with severer cold and the material of which this post is to be constructed, sod and sun-dried brick, cannot be procured or worked in the snow.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of 1848 Captain Ruff's men had constructed three buildings to quarter the officers and men—a bakery, a stable, and a large adobe storehouse. By the end of 1849 construction was completed on a hospital, a two story soldiers quarter, and a temporary magazine.<sup>19</sup> Fort Kearny was just getting off to a good start when news arrived of the discovery of gold

in California. The spring of 1849 was a period of increasing road traffic on the Great Platte River Road as California bound emigrants streamed past in record numbers. The Secretary of War's Annual Report for 1849 comments, "The events of the last eighteen months have added greatly in the importance of Forts Kearny and Laramie. Nearly 8,000 wagons, 30,000 people, and 80,000 draught animals have passed along this thoroughfare on the way to California..." It must be remembered that this is only a portion of the total traffic; Fort Kearny did not overlook the north side of the Great Platte River Road, only the south. Some estimates for the total combined traffic of both sides of the Platte range as high as 42,000 emigrants. The next five years were to be the years of highest road traffic, with an estimated 165,000 emigrants passing along the Great Platte River Road on their way to California and Oregon.<sup>20</sup>

This increased traffic upon the Great Platte River Road also increased the demands made upon the Army at Fort Kearny for protection, medical aid and other supplies. Additional troops were needed at Fort Kearny to handle the increased flow of traffic. On May 30, 1849, Captain Ruff was relieved of the command of Fort Kearny by Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin L. E. Bonneville of the Sixth Infantry. Captain Ruff's companies rejoined their regiment at Fort Laramie shortly thereafter.<sup>21</sup> With Lieutenant Colonel Bonneville were Companies F, G, and I of the Sixth Infantry, the new garrison of Fort Kearny. Lieutenant Colonel Bonneville graduated from West Point on April 14, 1813. A Frenchman by birth, he served in the Army until September 9, 1861, when he retired as a Colonel (Brevet Brigadier General). Bonneville commanded at Fort Kearny until July 16, 1849, a period of some forty-seven days. It was during Bonneville's short tenure at Fort Kearny that emigrant demands

placed an even heavier load on this new garrison. Troops were constantly on patrol along the Great Platte River Road to protect the emigrants from Indians. Two skirmishes with the Pawnee were recorded in October, 1849, with one soldier killed, several wounded.<sup>23</sup> Perhaps of greater importance was the logistical and medical aid Fort Kearny afforded the emigrants. M. Powell, writing of his journey in 1849, describes the blacksmith shop at Fort Kearny:

The venerable descendant of Vulcan, with his assistants, seems to be in great demand, as a large number of emigrants are waiting here to make repairs, and to give their mules time to recover from the effects of over-driving.<sup>24</sup>

Large numbers of emigrants camped about the Fort Kearny military reservation not only to use the blacksmith, but to use the postal facilities, reorganize themselves and their emigrant companies, and seek medical assistance from the post surgeon.<sup>25</sup> On February 20, 1849, Captain Ruff in a letter to Adjutant General Roger Jones stated:

I am deeply impressed with the humanity, indeed the necessity, of permitting the commanding officers of the several posts of this route, the exercise of a sound discretion, in making issues of provisions, to such emigrant parties of our citizens who either in returning from or going to Oregon, who frequently stand much in need of instant and substantial relief.<sup>26</sup>

As previously stated, Lieutenant Colonel Bonneville remained in command of Fort Kearny until July 16, 1849, when he received order to report to New York City. He was relieved on that same day by Captain (Brevet Major) Robert H. Chilton of the First Dragoons.<sup>27</sup> Captain Chilton was a West Point graduate of the class of 1833, Chilton resigned from the Army on April 29, 1861, to accept a commission from his native state of Virginia, as a Brigadier General in the Confederate States Army.<sup>28</sup> When Captain Chilton assumed command of the post, the garrison force also changed. Now the Fort Kearny garrison consisted of Companies H and I of the Sixth Infantry, and Company B of the First Dragoons, in all some 141 men present for duty. Captain Chilton

remained in command of the post until October 19, 1850.

During the years 1850 and 1851 there was a movement among some Army officers, notably Major General Winfield Scott, to abandon Fort Kearny. Emigrant road traffic during 1851 dropped from its previous high of 55,000 in 1850 to 9,000 in 1851 due to a cholera epidemic.<sup>29</sup> The cost of maintaining the post was high as nearly all of the forage and foodstuffs had to be shipped overland from Fort Leavenworth. Moreover, almost all of the wood and pasture had been used up in the surrounding area by passing emigrants.<sup>30</sup> Rising emigrant road traffic, an estimated 50,000 in 1852, would not permit the closing of Fort Kearny. However, one other means of economizing was found. As the months of emigrant traffic were April through October, the post was maintained at a strength of two or more companies. With the winter approaching in the months October and beyond, it was cheaper to reduce the force at Fort Kearny and send a least half or more of the troops to winter at Fort Leavenworth. A winter garrison at Fort Kearny usually numbered about seventy-five men, or one company. Then as spring approached the garrison was again reinforced.<sup>31</sup>

On October 19, 1850, post commanders again changed with Captain Henry W. Wharton of the Sixth Infantry replacing Captain Chilton. Captain Henry Wharton entered the Army on October 31, 1837, from the state of Alabama. He served until his retirement on December 1, 1863, as a Colonel commanding the Second Delaware Infantry.<sup>32</sup> Wharton has the unique distinction of being the post commander of Fort Kearny with the greatest longevity as commander. Serving from October 19, 1850, to June 18, 1854, and again from October 19, 1855, to April 6, 1857, Wharton's term of command was longer than any of the forty-four known post commanders of Fort Kearny.<sup>33</sup> An examination of the Post

Returns of Fort Kearny during the years of Captain Wharton's first command tenure show a rather quiet existence. The number of emigrants passing along the Great Platte River Road remained high with an estimated 50,000 in 1852 and 20,000 in 1853.<sup>34</sup> With Indian hostilities against the emigrants at a new low, there was no need to maintain a large garrison at Fort Kearny. The aggregate strength of the post averaged about seventy-five in the years 1851 to 1853. This lull in Indian activity was most probably due to the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1851, the cholera epidemic of 1852, and intertribal warfare among the Pawnee and the Sioux. Things had become so quiet that most of the officers and many of the men had moved their families to the post. On March 8, 1851, a chaplain was hired to provide spiritual guidance and act as schoolmaster for the children. The Reverend James De Pui, a Protestant Episcopal clergyman, served at Fort Kearny until November 8, 1858, when ill health forced him to leave.<sup>35</sup>

With only seventy-five men at Fort Kearney, the garrison was too small to perform both its military duties and all the caretaking and construction duties about the post. Consequently the Post Return of September, 1851, shows a small civilian labor force employed at Fort Kearny. The group consisted of:

one wheelwright at \$40.00 per month, one clerk at \$58.00 per month, one interpreter at \$40.00 per month, two mail carriers at \$50.00 per months each, and one civilian in charge of public property at Table Creek (old Fort Kearny) at \$10.00 per month.<sup>36</sup>

This period of time, 1851 to 1853, was a quiet time for the Army along the Great Platte River Road in Nebraska. However, the hazards of the Nebraska frontier were not solely confined to the danger of Indian attacks. Records show only two soldiers killed due to Indian action during the years 1849 to 1853 in Nebraska.<sup>37</sup> Not until the Grattan Incident of 1854 and the

subsequent Sioux War of 1855, did this relative quiet along the Nebraska frontier change. Other hazards of the frontier lay within two areas: accidents and sickness. Accidents for the most part were confined to the emigrants. Emigrants, to a large degree, were not conversant in the use of firearms, the care of domestic animals, and swimming. Large numbers of emigrants were killed and/or injured due to accidental shootings, being run over by their own horses, mules or oxen, or drowning while attempting to cross the Platte or Little Blue Rivers. Recorded accidents among the troops in Nebraska in 1849 to 1853 seemed to be rare; perhaps because of their training, they did not experience as many accidents as the emigrants did. The greatest danger to both soldier and emigrant was the danger of disease or sickness. Asiatic cholera was the number one killer of the frontier, followed closely by scurvy. Cholera was almost exclusively a disease found among the emigrants. The Surgeon General's Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States shows only four cases of cholera among the troops at Fort Kearny in the years 1849 to 1853. All four of these troops contracted the disease outside the post reservation, and none of them died. Cholera is a water borne virus, and it is probable that the post water supply was not contaminated by the cholera virus, but the water supply along the Great Platte River Road may not have been so lucky. For the soldiers of Fort Kearny, scurvy in the years 1849 and 1850 was a greater killer than cholera, Surgeon S. P. Moore in 1850 had the following comments:

The scurvy has increased to a much greater degree than was anticipated. Thirteen of the cases were very severe, attended by great lassitude... The habitual use of salt and unwholesome food, conjoined with fatiguing labor, were the exciting causes of the disease.<sup>38</sup>

The records show that at least one soldier in 1849 and one in 1850 died at Fort Kearny due to scurvy. The obvious reason for this outbreak of



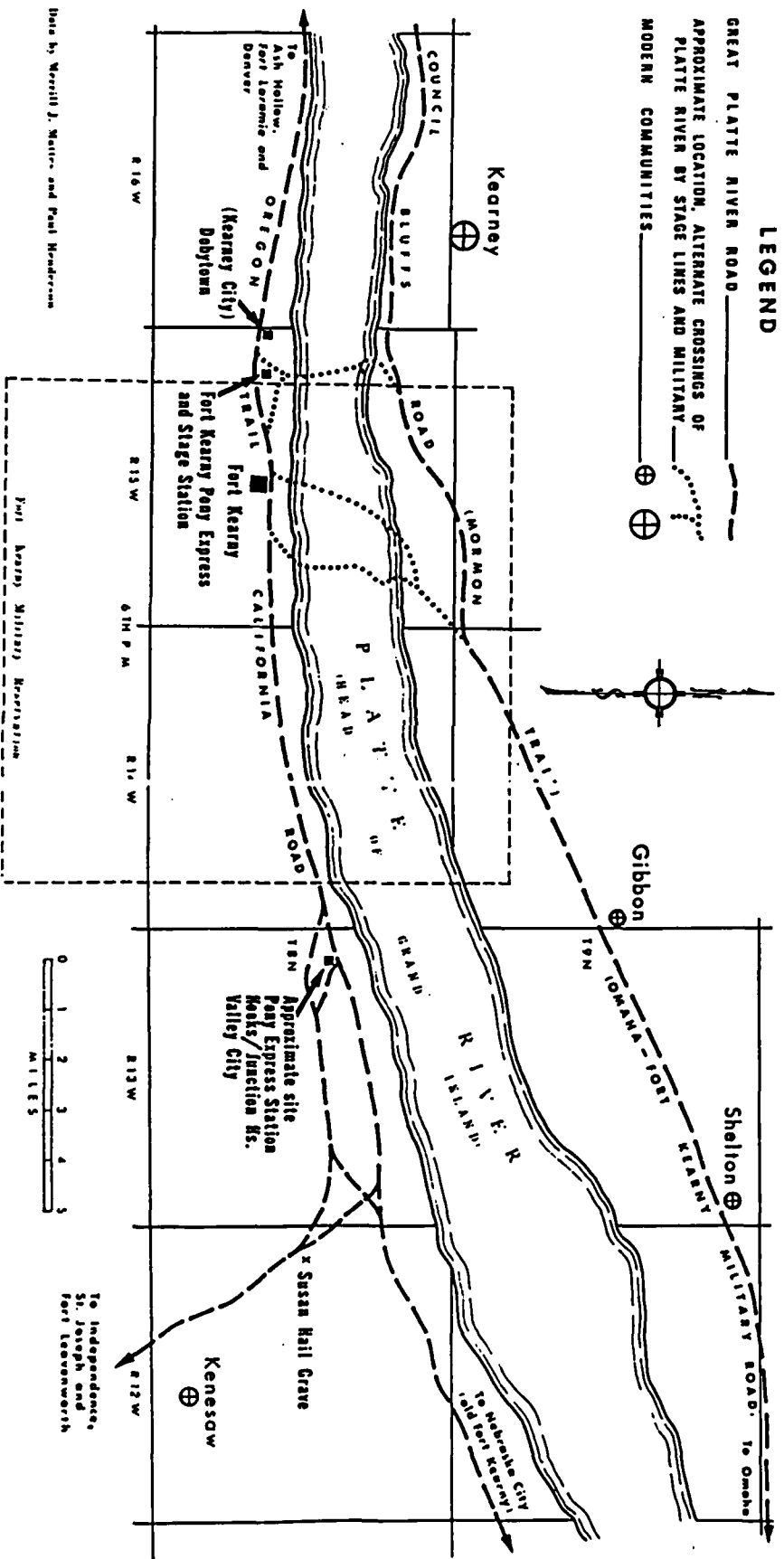
scurvy, as we now know, was a lack of vitamin C in the diet of the troops. This emphasizes the lack of fresh vegetables and fruits in a vitamin poor diet, as shown in the previous chapter. However, in most respects the troops were better off than the emigrants. At least, with the exception of a short period in 1849, there was generally a doctor available at Fort Kearny. As long as the Army kept up a high sanitation level among the troops at Fort Kearny, and attempted to obtain some vitamin C enriched foods, the troops remained in a good state of health.

Did the Army accomplish its prime mission, the protection of emigrants along the Great Platte River Road in Nebraska? Apparently so, for few emigrant lives were lost to Indian hostile action. Mattes asserts in his book, The Great Platte River Road, that the troops at Fort Kearny made "innumerable patrols" in the defense of the Great Platte River Road. This claim is further supported by the Fort Kearny Post Returns, which show numerous troops going to and from the various military posts along the Great Platte River Road. As previously mentioned, these patrols found little Indian hostility, with the exception of the two skirmishes with the Pawnee in October, 1849.<sup>39</sup> More emigrants crossing Nebraska died due to their own carelessness and sickness than any other factors combined. Fort Kearny as a frontier outpost supplied the emigrants with medical aid, blacksmithing, postal facilities, a seat of government, and foodstuffs for those in need. Many lives were saved by the soldiers at Fort Kearny due to their humanitarian functions, rather than their military duties.<sup>40</sup> Control over the emigrants as they passed along the Great Platte River Road was hard, if not impossible, to maintain. Wilson, in his Fort Kearny on the Platte, claims that emigrants passing the post were required to register with the post in 1849. Eventually, according to Wilson, this requirement was dropped.<sup>41</sup> Even if

this requirement had been strictly enforced, the fort could only control the south side of the Platte River, and not the north side. It is conjectural whether or not the military forced emigrants into trains/companies for their mutual protection. It is almost certain that the military suggested that this be done, particularly if the emigrant had not done so prior to arriving at Fort Kearny. It is known that most emigrants either formed companies while at Fort Kearny or reorganized their companies. Once again it is conjectural whether or not the Army forced this upon the emigrant or the circumstances of the trail did. What is known with some certainty is that commanders at Fort Kearny did on occasion limit or forbid access to the Fort Kearny Military Reservation. As a matter of survival, particularly after 1850, post commanders had to control the grazing and lumber rights of their area. When the reservation was low on grass and wood, the restrictions on emigrant camping within the ten square mile military reservation probably went into effect.<sup>42</sup>

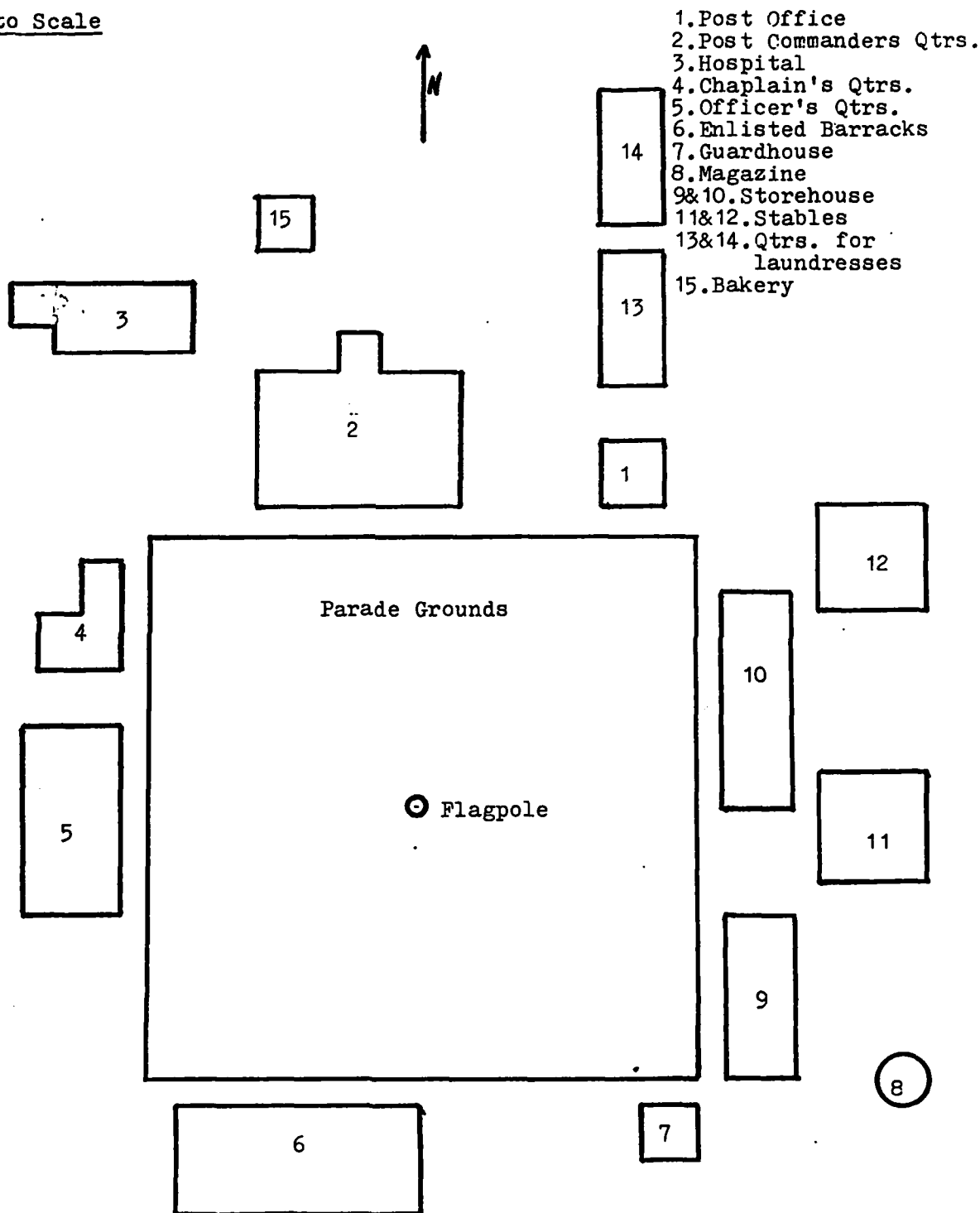
During the years 1849-1853 the Army in Nebraska frontier accomplished its primary mission of emigrant defense. The greater emphasis, however, was placed on its other more benevolent activities. Without the aid and assistance rendered by the Army to the emigrants along the Great Platte River Road, it is doubtful that many of the emigrants would have survived. Untold numbers of passing emigrants owed their existence to the help given them by the soldiers of Fort Kearny. The Army did succeed in protecting and aiding the emigrants, but it did so in a manner not conceived of when they went forth to defend the emigrant of the frontier.

# GREAT PLATTE RIVER ROAD VICINITY OF FORT KEARNY MILITARY RESERVATION



Post Diagram, Fort Kearny, 1853.

Not to Scale



1. Post Office
2. Post Commanders Qtrs.
3. Hospital
4. Chaplain's Qtrs.
5. Officer's Qtrs.
6. Enlisted Barracks
7. Guardhouse
8. Magazine
- 9&10. Storehouse
- 11&12. Stables
- 13&14. Qtrs. for laundresses
15. Bakery

(This diagram was drawn based on information gathered from the Secretary of War's Annual Report of 1850 and 1852; Merrill J. Mattes's The Great Platte River Road; D. Ray Wilson's Fort Kearny on the Platte; and William E.L. Bunn's painting, "Fort Kearney," courtesy Treasury Art Project.)

Endnotes, Chapter V, "The Army and the Nebraska Frontier"

<sup>1</sup>Lyle E. Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney." Kearney, Nebraska, 1938 (Typewritten), p. 2. This unpublished manuscript is currently in the possession of Professor Philip Holmgren, Department of History, Kearney State College, Kearney, Nebraska. (Hereafter cited as Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney"). See also D. Ray Wilson, Fort Kearney on the Platte. (Dundee, Ill.: Crossroads Communications, 1980), p. 7. (Hereafter cited as Wilson, Fort Kearney).

<sup>2</sup>Francis P. Prucha, The Sword of the Republic. (New York: Macmillan Co., 1969), p. 392. See also John C. Fremont, Report of The Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains in the year 1842, and to Oregon and North California in the years 1843-'44. Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1845; reprint ed., Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, Inc., 1966), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup>U.S., Statues at Large, vol. 9, pp. 13-14 (Dec. 1, 1945 to Mar. 3, 1951), "An act to provide for raising a Regiment of mounted Riflemen, and for establishing military Stations on the Route to Oregon." May 19, 1846. (Hereafter cited as U.S. Statues at Large).

<sup>4</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," pp. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup>Wilson, Fort Kearney, pp. 19-20.

<sup>6</sup>U.S., Statutes at Large, Vol. 9, pp. 13-14.

<sup>7</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 19.

<sup>8</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 20. See also Fort Kearney, Post Returns. October, 1847. Modern Military Records Division, Record Group 94, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter cited as Ft. Kearney, Post Returns).

<sup>9</sup>Wilson, Fort Kearney, pp. 24-27.

<sup>10</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 43. See also Ft. Kearney, Post Returns, 1848.

<sup>11</sup>Wilson, Fort Kearney, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup>U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1849. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1849, p. 225 (Hereafter cited as War, Annual Report, 1849).

<sup>13</sup>Robert M. Utley, Frontiersmen in Blue. (New York: Macmillian Co., 1967), p. 22. See also U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1854 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1854), pp. 16-17.

<sup>14</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 47. See also Wilson, Fort Kearney, pp. 29-30; and Ft. Kearney, Post Returns, October, 1848.

<sup>15</sup>U.S., Department of War, Historical Register and Dictionary of the United States Army, 1789-1903, 2 vols. (Hereafter cited as War, Historical Register) (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904), 1:851.

<sup>16</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 47.

<sup>17</sup>Ft. Kearney, Post Returns, October, 1848. See also Wilson, Fort Kearney, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 48.

<sup>19</sup>War, Annual Report, 1849, p. 225.

<sup>20</sup>War, Annual Report, 1849, p. 225. See also Merrill J. Mattes, The Great Platte River Road. (Lincoln, Nebraska: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), p. 23. (Hereafter cited as Mattes, The Great Platte River Road).

<sup>21</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 53. See also Ft. Kearney, Post Returns, June 1849.

<sup>22</sup>War, Historical Register, 1:230.

<sup>23</sup>George W. Webb, Chronological list of engagements between the Regular Army of the United States and various tribes of hostile Indians which occurred during the years 1790 to 1898, inclusive. (St. Joseph, Missouri: Wing Press, 1939; reprint ed., New York: AMS Press, 1976), p. 10. (Hereafter cited as Webb, Chronological List).

<sup>24</sup>M. Powell, "Overland Journey to California," Littell's Living Age, October 27, 1849, pp. 155-158.

<sup>25</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," pp. 57-67.

<sup>26</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 61.

<sup>27</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 69. See also Ft. Kearny, Post Returns, July, 1849.

<sup>28</sup>War, Historical Register, 1:299.

<sup>29</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, pp. 82-86.

<sup>30</sup>U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1851. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1851), p. 161 (Hereafter cited as War, Annual Report, 1851). See also Wilson, Fort Kearney, p. 37.

<sup>31</sup>See also Ft. Kearney, Post Returns, May, October, 1850.

<sup>32</sup>War, Historical Register, 1:1022.

<sup>33</sup>Mantor, "The History of Fort Kearney," p. 77. See also Ft. Kearny, Post Returns, October, 1850.

<sup>34</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 23.

<sup>35</sup>See also Ft. Kearny, Post Returns, March, 1851.

<sup>36</sup>Ft. Kearny, Post Returns, September, 1851.

<sup>37</sup>Webb, Chronological List, pp. 10-11

<sup>38</sup>U.S., Senate Exec. Doc. No. 96. 34th Cong. 1st sess., Vol. 18, 1856 (Serial 827) "Statistical Report on the Sickness and Mortality in the Army of the United States, 1839-1855." (Washington, D.C.: A. O. P. Nicholson, Printer, 1856), p. 82. See also Wilson, Fort Kearny, p. 30.

<sup>39</sup>Mattes, The Great Platte River Road, p. 223. See also Fort Kearny Post Returns, October, 1849.

<sup>40</sup>For a discussion of the medical aid rendered to emigrants traveling along the Great Platte River Road, see U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1852 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1852), pp. 136-137. (Hereafter cited as War, Annual Report, 1852); and U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1853 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1853), pp. 144 and 148. (Hereafter cited as War, Annual Report, 1853). Although these documents do not mention exact numbers, these accounts describe aid given to "numerous" emigrants and complain of the lack of additional trained medical personnel at the post on the Great Platte River Road. Foodstuffs supplied to "Distressed emigrants" is covered in War, Annual Report, 1851, p. 336. Even firearms were issued to emigrants "by authority of the resolution of Congress approved 2 March, 1849, amount in value to \$2,854.71." See U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1850 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1850), p. 465.

<sup>41</sup>Wilson, Fort Kearny, p. 33.

<sup>42</sup>To support this assertion there exists two pieces of evidence in the Secretary of War, Annual Reports of 1851 and 1853. War, Annual Report, 1851, p. 164, has a copy of General Order Number 1, January 8, 1851, which orders Post Commanders in Military Department Six to commence "field cultivation" on their respective posts. This "field or farm culture will

embrace, as far as practicable, grains for bread and forage, and long forage." Given this type of order it may be surmised therefore that Post Commanders would have been forced into restricting entry on their post reservations to protect their crops. Additionally War, Annual Report, 1853, p. 24, notes that there were appearing along the Plains trails "spaces... in which there is neither grass nor water..." Once again this lack of forage and water along the Great Platte River Road would force Post Commanders into restricting access into their reservations in an attempt to conserve their own resources.



## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS

In general the following conclusions can be deduced from the overall study of the U.S. Army in that time, 1849-1853, and place, frontier Nebraska. The threat of Indian attack against helpless emigrants has been exaggerated. The Indians during that time were not hostile toward the Whites. If left alone to pursue their own path, the Indian did not set out to harm or molest the emigrant. This is not to say that the Indian did not come in contact with the emigrants. Indian groups would approach emigrants singly, or in large bodies to trade and/or beg from the Whites, rarely would these encounters become violent. When violence did occur, according to John Unruh in The Plains Across, the emigrant generally killed more Indians than the Indians killed emigrants. Emigrant groups, therefore, were not defenseless, they were better armed and equipped than the Indians. Superiority of firepower was on the side of the Whites, and not the Indians. Without doubt there were more Indians killed by other Indians in the years 1849-1853 than there were Indians killed by Whites. Both Sioux and Pawnee were more occupied with each other than with the Whites. Both tribes were suffering from a variety of new illnesses that sapped their strength. These illnesses - cholera, smallpox, measles, mumps and venereal diseases - were transmitted to the Indians by the emigrants.

When one considers the number of people estimated to have traversed the Great Platte River Road during the years 1849 to 1853, and contrasts that

number with the estimated amount of people killed by Indians, the conclusion arrived at is inescapable. There was no Indian threat during the westward migration in the years 1849-1853 along the Great Platte River Road.

The U.S. Army went into the Nebraska frontier with the mission of emigrant defense against a perceived Indian threat. As seen previously, this threat did not materialize in the years 1849 to 1853. During this five year period only one soldier died as a direct result of Indian hostile actions. More soldiers died of cholera and scurvy at Fort Kearny than from hostile Indian action in 1849-1853. The Army, realizing that the danger of Indian attacks did not exist, requested that the garrison at Fort Kearny be removed in the interests of economy.<sup>1</sup> Evidence indicates that the reason the post was not shut down was political. Western Congressmen and Senators would have had a difficult time explaining to their constituents why a key post offering protection and aid to emigrants on a major roadway west was being closed. Fort Kearny's contribution to the American westward migration was much greater as an aid station than as a military defensive strongpoint. As time passed, it was the Fort Kearny surgeon, blacksmith, wheelwright, postal clerk, and storekeeper that proved to be the focus of activity on the post. Infantry and dragoons were there and they were kept busy, but they were used in ways other than what was originally intended. This was a quiet time and place for the U.S. Army, a time of little glory, but much reward. If the ultimate purpose of a military force is to protect and aid the society from which it springs, then the U.S. Army was successful in 1849-1853 in Nebraska. Their success did not come to them in the manner in which they expected it. More lives were saved by their humanitarian and benevolent acts than by any defensive act of the force as it existed in Nebraska.

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DEFENDING THE FRONTIER: A STUDY OF THE US ARMY IN THE  
DEFENSE OF THE NEBRASKA FRONTIER IN THE YEARS 1849-1853  
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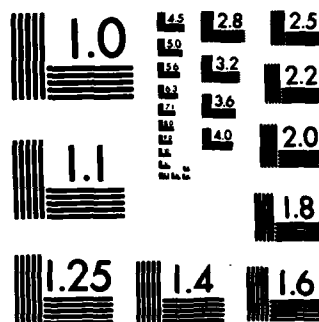
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Ultimate conflict between the Indian and the White was inevitable. The Indian in Nebraska lived a life totally dependent upon the natural resources of the area. The water sources, grazing areas, and most important the buffalo, determined the Indians' existence and survival on the Great Plains. If any one or all of these key items decreased in quantity or quality, then also would the Indian tribes trying to survive on them. Warfare between the Pawnee and Sioux occurred because both sides were in direct competition for these limited natural resources, especially the buffalo. The stronger, more aggressive culture would survive this conflict. Ultimately it was the Sioux who beat the Pawnee and won the buffalo hunting rights. Competition started between the Indians and the Whites as soon as the emigrants entered Nebraska. Emigrants used the same water sources as the Indians and in much greater numbers. Emigrants used up what little timber there was in the area; their domestic animals consumed the grass of the better grazing areas for miles on either side of the Great Platte River Road. Large numbers of emigrants killed and ate numerous buffalo. Those buffalo that were not killed were frightened away from the Great Platte River Road. This destruction of the Indians' ecological base of survival did not go unnoticed. In 1849 Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Orlando Brown, noted that "The great destruction of the buffalo by the emigrants has... caused much dissatisfaction" among the Indians.<sup>2</sup> Commissioner Brown spoke of "vast numbers of whites" destroying Indian "buffalo, timber, grass, & (etc.)," and that the future of the Plains Indians looked "gloomy" because of this destruction.<sup>3</sup> Luke Lea, Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1850, also talked of two years of destruction of the natural resources by the emigrants and warned of future Indian hostility due to the destruction of their hunting grounds.<sup>4</sup> Again in 1851, Commissioner Lea attributed the destruction of the buffalo

to the emigrants.<sup>5</sup> The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report of 1852, noted that "Vast quantities of game ... have been destroyed, ... limited forests have been laid waste."<sup>6</sup> The story was no different in 1853 when Commissioner of Indian Affairs, George Manypenny, made note of the emigrants destroying Plains Indians hunting grounds, water, timber and grass sources.<sup>7</sup> It is evident that the ecological basis of Indian existence in Nebraska was being destroyed by the emigrants passing through Nebraska in 1849 through 1853.

The treaties between the Indians and the Whites were of little value. These treaties were flawed from the start, because neither side understood the other, or what they were agreeing to. Arbitration of problem areas with the Indians, by the Whites, was difficult due to their perception of the Indians as "hostile savages." For the Indian, it was difficult to negotiate with a people that were making their life style increasingly difficult to maintain. Survival for the Indian became the ultimate question; it was only a matter of time before competition turned into conflict. The year following the period covered in this report, 1854, saw the catalyst occur that ended the peaceful co-existence between Indian and White. On August 19, 1854, a brash, young, Second Lieutenant named John L. Grattan started a war with the Sioux over an emigrant's lost cow. In starting this war Grattan died in the first volley and let loose a period of intermittent Indian warfare lasting almost forty years.

Historians, especially military historians, tend to concentrate on those periods of history that center on periods of turmoil and conflict. This study of the U.S. Army in Nebraska during the years 1849 to 1853 deals with a time when there is essentially no conflict. There is something to be learned from these periods of peace, and that is how to keep the peace.

It is to the credit of the U.S. Army that it performed as well as it did under the most trying of circumstances, for so little recognition. For the U.S. Army, this most rewarding and effective time is not in the counting of battles won; it is in the counting of lives saved.

## Chapter VI, Conclusions

<sup>1</sup>U.S., Department of War, Secretary of War, Annual Report, 1851  
(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1851), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>U.S., Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1849  
(Washington, D.C.: Gideon & Co., 1850), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup>U.S., Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1849  
(Washington, D.C.: Gideon & Co., 1850), pp. 132-133.

<sup>4</sup>U.S., Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1850  
(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1850), pp. 24 and 46.

<sup>5</sup>U.S., Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1851  
(Washington, D.C.: Gideon & Co., 1851), p. 62.

<sup>6</sup>U.S., Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1852  
(Washington, D.C.: Robert Armstrong, Printer, 1852), p. 67.

<sup>7</sup>U.S., Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1853  
(Washington, D.C.: Robert Armstrong, Printer, 1853), p. 109.



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